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WRITING CRAFT: THE WORKSHOP SYSTEM IN AMERICAN CULTURE

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how and why manual labor is invoked as a metaphor for literary production across the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Specifically, I am concerned with that form of literary production we know as the creative writing "workshop." Where does this term originate, I ask, and to what ends? How do literary techniques such as imagery, dialogue, structure, texture, and tone come to be thought of as creative writing "craft," as strict technical construction with the brick and mortar of language? Most importantly, what is at stake—aesthetically, socially, economically—in the figuration of literary production as craft labor? For there is noting inherent in creative writing that precludes one from practicing it in a "salon" or "studio" or "seminar." There is nothing in the discipline that necessitates a craft-based approach over one based on affective response or literary history or even poetic theory. With the rise of the workshop system in American culture, however, work and writing have been welded together like steel plates—this dissertation inspects that weld.

Beginning with the first writing "workshop" so called—the 47 Workshop taught by drama professor George Pierce Baker of Harvard from 1912 to 1924—I show how that term mediated key ideological tensions rending American culture during the industrialization of the early twentieth century. In doing so, I track two interrelated procedures. First, I assess how craft rhetoric supplied a set of values by which to reorient institutions of higher education and, thereby, to alter American literary theory and practice. Second, I explore how artists affiliated with early workshops used them to stage a wider social intervention, mobilizing literary craftsmanship to rethink the meaning and ramifications of labor. As work—in the form of writing craft—entered institutions of higher education, workshop itself became a laboring force in American culture. If Baker and others marshaled craft toward economic critique, however, craft pedagogies would come with rise of the MFA industry to consolidate the authority of elite educational institutions, veiling the postwar

university's promotion of professional-managerial values in the language of manual labor. The workshop poem or short story, this is to say, shares discursive space with the "craft" IPA or "hand-loomed" Pottery Barn rug, nostalgically invoking those work practices the university itself has helped to render obsolete. Tracing an arc that extends from the American Arts and Crafts movement—to which Baker had material and ideological ties—through the work of novelist Meridel Le Sueur at the Minnesota Labor School to the pedagogies of Black Mountain College and the postwar MFA, I bridge forms, genres, and disciplines in order to show how present-day creative writing restructures transhistorical questions of labor, education, and aesthetic and economic production.

My opening chapter, accordingly, returns to the first creative writing "workshop" to use that name. Drawing on extensive archival research, I reconstruct the procedures of Baker's 47 Workshop and attend to the craft ideology informing them. Specifically, I show how Baker adapts a turn-of-the-century "craft ideal" promoted by the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston. As craft ideologues articulated it, that ideal encouraged the worker's self-expression through his labor, but simultaneously tempered expression through the maintenance of technical standards like those enforced by pre-industrial guilds. In succeeding chapters, I reveal how this craft ideal informs the subsequent history of creative writing. In this first chapter, I focus more narrowly on a pair of dramatic texts developed under the influence of the 47 Workshop proper. The first, Baker's *Control: A Pageant of Engineering Progress*, pointedly challenges the priorities of an emergent industrial-corporate regime, leveling a sharp critique of those forces that would subsume aesthetic and spiritual considerations to pecuniary motives. The second—the three-act play *Airways, Inc.*, written by Baker's student John Dos Passos—figures the transformation of the intellectual's labor from a kind of craftsmanship to a mode of technical engineering, a concept that would prove foundational for Dos Passos's later literary and political development.

In my second chapter, I show how the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal cleaves into opposed factions of the 1930s literary Left. On one hand, writers like Dos Passos and *Partisan Review* editors Philip Rahv and William Phillips viewed the writer as a "technician" whose ultimate responsibility was fastidious adherence to modernist technique. On the other hand, Mike Gold's *New Masses* promoted the self-expression of proletarian writers otherwise unschooled in literary arts. Tracking this schizophrenic inheritance of American Arts and Crafts ideology, I argue that debates internal to the 1930s Left supplied key rhetoric that would influence later creative writing workshops, particularly the pedagogical promotion of imagery famously metonymized as "show don't tell." Of course, these debates also fenced out a discursive field within which 1930s writers plied their craft. In this chapter I attend to one of those writers, Meridel Le Sueur, as a case study in how craft rhetoric informed literary production during an era in which the relationship between labor and literature was sharply contested. While Le Sueur's pedagogy at the Minnesota Labor School—including her 1937 textbook *Worker Writers*—cultivates proletarian self-expression, her feminist working-class novel, *I Hear Men Talking*, reveals deep affinities with modernist craft, helping us understand how modernism itself was built around questions of labor.

If the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal cleaves into opposing factions of the 1930s Left, it also reemerges whole at Black Mountain College in 1933, where students' expressive labor was tempered by and channeled through material resistances. At Black Mountain, students and faculty understood craft as a spiritual and self-annulling discipline, a way of sublimating the expressive ego in and through materiality. Attending to the ways in which the craft ideal informs—and becomes transformed by—the curriculum of Black Mountain College not only helps us track the evolution of American Arts and Crafts ideology, but allows us to reassess the careers of key Black Mountain figures, among them visual artists Josef and Anni Albers and poet Robert Duncan. Reading the Alberses' pedagogy, visual art, and weavings alongside archival documentation of the school's "work

program," I show how the Alberses' earlier craftwork at the Bauhaus fuses with American Arts and Crafts ideology to form a distinctly spiritualized craft ethos. In turn, I examine Duncan's creative writing workshops at Black Mountain in order to contextualize his own literary production as part of a broader Black Mountain craft ideal.

While previous chapters focus on educational institutions, my fourth chapter examines the creative writing "craft book" as a generic institution that mediated, in its own way, the relationship between labor and literature. The widespread figuration of writing as work in early twentieth-century craft books, I argue, triangulated a given genre's relation to an evolving literary marketplace. The poetry craft book, in particular, gives new discursive life to the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal, figuring poetry as a spiritual expression facilitated—though never compromised—by technical facility. Though the craft book constituted a middlebrow form, the genre was also taken up by modernist writers as a way of advancing their own distinctly avant-garde poetics, as I reveal in my treatment of Gertrude Stein's *How to Write* and Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading*. In the postwar era, moreover, the craft book plays a pivotal role in rewriting the university's professional-managerial ethos as meaningful manual labor. Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town*, for instance, offers a rich diagnostic of the institutional habitus of creative writing, modeling an ambivalence that extends to his contemporaneous poetry collection, *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*. Poetic craftsmanship may arrogate economic and cultural authority to the university, Hugo argues, but it also allows working-class writers entrée to those professional discourses on which economic success depends.

Finally, a brief coda investigates how the craft legacy of creative writing informs the first and most iconic of the postwar programs in creative writing: the Iowa Writers' Workshop. At Iowa, craft rhetoric provided the legitimating language for an insurgent attempt—Irving Babbitt's "New Humanism"—to transform literary study at the university level and, rather more ambitiously, to reconceive the relation between literary study and American democracy. As I reveal, New

Humanists prioritized that aspect of an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal which disciplined the craftsman's self-expression with rigorous adherence to technical standards supplied by western literary tradition. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the New Humanist iteration of this craft ideal figures prominently in the work of two poets who studied at Iowa at the height of New Humanist influence there. In the poetry of Workshop director Paul Engle and graduate student Margaret Walker, Engle's advisee, we find a multi-faceted reckoning with the New Humanist circuit between literary discipline and democratic citizenship, as these writers respectively reinforce and deconstruct the craft of the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Introduction

"Work is never enough done."

—Virgil, *Georgics*

This is a project about work.

More accurately, it is a project about how and why work is invoked as a metaphor for literary production across the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In disarticulating this metaphor—prying apart its constitutive elements to make it speak—I am especially concerned with that form of literary production we know as the creative writing "workshop." Where does this term originate, I ask, and to what ends? How do literary techniques such as imagery, dialogue, structure, texture, and tone come to be thought of as creative writing "craft," as strict technical construction with the brick and mortar of language? Most importantly, what is at stake—aesthetically, socially, economically—in the figuration of literary production as craft labor?

The answers to these questions, it turns out, lie in a period of U.S. history during which work itself changed in dramatic ways. Though new forms of manufacturing had been transforming the nature and meaning of labor since the Civil War, a number of interrelated factors combined around the turn of the century to accelerate the industrialization of the American economy. As the nation's technological expertise was harnessed by evolving industrial enterprises, the entrepreneurial capitalism of robber barons like Andrew Carnegie gave way to scaled, vertically integrated, scientifically managed, and otherwise rationalized corporate structures. In turn, new financial institutions emerged which specialized in accruing the vast sums necessary to maintain these corporate behemoths. At the same time, a distinct "professional-managerial class" was tasked with coordinating the increasingly complex operations that sustained this new industrial-corporate regime; churned out in ever-greater numbers by the nation's educational system, this class of salaried

mental workers developed modern managerial methods to regulate everything from hiring and payroll to disciplinary procedures to work flow and workspace organization. What political theorist James Burnham termed the "managerial revolution" was underway—or, to invoke a description popularized by economic historian Alfred D. Chandler, the invisible hand of the free market had been replaced by "the visible hand of management." As I will show, Chandler's synecdochal sleight of hand had major implications for the creative writing workshop.[1]

Beneath that hand, of course, American workers bridled, rebelling in many forms against substandard wages, hazardous working conditions, and what workers and concerned observers perceived as a generally dehumanizing division of industrial labor.[2] Emerging contemporaneously with those transformations that comprised a "second industrial revolution," therefore, were two initiatives which sought in distinct ways to redress the increasing disenfranchisement of American workers. The first and most well-known of these initiatives was the American labor movement. Galvanized by economic changes that disproportionately affected the working-class, large-scale "industrial unions" began during this period to wrest power and membership from more restrictive "craft unions" like the American Federation of Labor. The "One Big Union" of the Industrial Workers of the World, for instance, was founded in 1905 after a secret meeting of diverse workers

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[1] My use of the term "professional-managerial class" derives from the definition first proposed by economic historians Barbara and John Ehrenreich. See especially Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," in *Between Labor and Capital*, ed. Pat Walker (Boston: South End Press, 1979), 12-26. For more on Burnham's "managerial revolution," see James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution or What Is Happening in the World Now* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960). For Chandler's description of "the visible hand," see Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977).

[2] As late, for instance, as the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938, hundreds of thousands of children below the age of 14 worked 60-hour weeks in mines, mills, factories, and tenement sweatshops, rarely earning more than a few cents per day. Names like Monongah, Triangle Shirtwaist, and Grover Shoe, moreover, testify succinctly to the perilous circumstances under which workers of all ages carried out their labor. And less dramatically, perhaps—but with far vaster consequences—Frederick Winslow Taylor spent the first decade of the twentieth century dismantling previously holistic work practices into the most menial of tasks, meticulously timing workers' movements in order to maximize workplace efficiency. For broad but well-informed economic histories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Melvyn Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker, 1865-1920* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1985); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 7-10; and Michael Lind, *Land of Promise: An Economic History of the United States* (New York: Harper, 2012), 151-249.

previously excluded from the AFL, and three decades later, in 1935, the Congress of Industrial Organizations opened its doors to millions of other "unskilled" laborers, workers who had manned the lines and swept the shop floors on which the new industrial-corporate regime had been built. Equally at odds with that regime—and more relevant to the history of the writing workshop—was an American Arts and Crafts movement which looked back to its British counterpart in order to develop an alternative to industrial manufacturing. Inspired by craft idealogues like John Ruskin and William Morris, American Arts and Crafts initiatives proliferated across the late nineteenth century, from the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston (1897) on the East Coast to the "California Bungalow" style promoted by West Coast architectural firms like Greene and Greene (1894). Across these initiatives, craft theorists and practitioners advocated for holistic labor practices, discriminating technique, small-scale production, and respect for craft materials, offering a bold—if not wholly original—challenge to accelerating industrialization. Though the American labor and American Arts and Crafts movements were made up of diverse and sometimes irreconcilable elements—and though the legacy of both remains mixed—they nonetheless provided a platform and meaningful ideological agenda with which to address the ever more dire state of American workers.[3]

It is within this context that American literary modernism took shape, with modernist writers responding in multiple forms to the "labor problem" wracking the nation's economy. One of those forms was the creative writing workshop, a practice—and, as I show, a discourse and value system—which mediated key ideological tensions rending American culture across the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Throughout this period, "workshop" was taken up by diverse factions of writers and educators in an effort to reframe literary production as a particular, politically

[3] For excellent overviews of the U.S. labor movement, see Melvyn Dubofsky and Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America: A History* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2004) and Elizabeth Faue, *Rethinking the American Labor Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2017). For surveys of the American Arts and Crafts movements, see Leslie Greene Bowman, *American Arts and Crafts: Virtue in Design* (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1994); Robert Judson Clark, ed., *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1876-1916* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); and Edward Lucie-Smith, *The Story of Craft: The Craftsman's Role in Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

determined mode of labor. Two interrelated processes characterized this effort. First, the adoption of a craft lexicon including "workshop" supplied a set of values by which to reorient institutions of higher education and, in so doing, to alter American literary theory and practice. Second, and more expansively, writers affiliated with early workshops used them to stage a wider social and economic intervention, mobilizing literary craftsmanship to rethink the meaning and ramifications of labor. They did so, as I've suggested, at a time when those meanings were very much in flux.

This project endeavors, then, to reconstruct an already heavily scaffolded literary and historical epoch around the creative writing workshop, that site which parsed, protested, and even produced a continuously evolving industrial-corporate economy. Despite growing scholarly interest in creative writing, the discipline's central practice and sole institutional form has remained invisible before our very eyes. Why has this been the case, I ask? Where is the work on workshop? For there is nothing inherent in creative writing that precludes one from practicing it in a "salon" or "studio" or "seminar." There is nothing in the discipline that necessitates craft-based pedagogies over approaches based on affective response or literary history or even poetic theory. With the rise of the "workshop system" in American culture, however, work and writing were welded together like steel plates. This project inspects that weld.

Toward a "Craft Ideal" of Creative Writing

Figurations of literary production as labor reach back, of course, to the ancient Greek understanding of *poiesis* as an effort in "making" or "creating," a concept as integral to classical-era poetics as it remains to the creative writing workshop.

While Plato viewed the poet's work as an inferior form of "manufacture"—"third in order from king and truth," Plato says, and therefore inimical to the wellbeing of the republic—Aristotle understood the poet as a "maker of likenesses" whose "well-constructed" work supplied an

aspirational model of civic virtue.[4] The Roman poet Horace echoed Aristotle's view of poetry as ethically instructive, linking the genre even more closely with manual labor than had his Greek predecessors. The didactic treatise "Ars Poetica," for instance, invokes a number of craft practices as analogues for poetic composition, as Horace advises would-be writers to "put the badly turned lines back on the anvil," to "polish" poems "ten times over to satisfy the well-pared nail," and to invest "labor and time" toward "poems that deserve preserving […] in smooth cypress." Horace understood his own writing, moreover, as a "fashion[ing]" of "painstaking songs," labor evident among other places in his lapidary, tightly crafted odes and epodes.[5] Similar figurations recur repeatedly across western literary history, from medieval texts understood by monks and scholastics as "*opera Dei*" to Edward Young's eighteenth-century distinction between the "original composition" of the inspired poet and "a sort of *manufacture* wrought up by those *mechanics*, *art* and *labor*, out of pre-existent materials not their own." A cornerstone of Romantic aesthetics, Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* compares poetry to manual labor in order, ultimately, to reject such comparisons, privileging organic or "spontaneous" writing over and against work too carefully crafted. "A *genius* differs from a *good understanding* as a magician from a good architect," Young argues. "[*T*]*hat* raises his structure by means invisible; *this* by the skillful use of common tools. Hence genius has ever been supposed to partake of something divine."[6]

Though analogies between work and writing endure into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—in New Critical notions of the "well-wrought" poem, in Black Mountain "field poetics," in the "braided" poetries of writers like Jorie Graham and Linda Gregerson—I focus in this

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[4] Plato, *The Republic* 10.596-597, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, eds. D. A. Russell and Michael Winterbottom, trans. D. A. Russell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 37, 39. Aristotle, *Poetics* 25.1460b8, 6.1450b32, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. Ingram Bywater (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 1483, 1462.

[5] Horace, "The Art of Poetry," in *Classical Literary Criticism*, eds. D. A. Russell and Michael Winterbottom, trans. Michael Winterbottom (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 109, 105, 106. Horace "Ode IV.2," in *Odes and Epodes*, trans. Niall Rudd (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 223, 225.

[6] Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, ed. Edith J. Morley (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1918), 7, 13. [emphasis in original]

dissertation on the first time the term "workshop" is used in the context of creative writing pedagogy. That occurs at Harvard University in 1912, when drama professor George Pierce Baker establishes an institution for the writing and production of plays which he names, advisedly, the "47 Workshop." "That is what it seems to me we could call our experiment," Baker writes—and he did.[7] Like many of Boston's cultural elite at the time—including fellow Harvard professors Charles Eliot Norton and Herbert Langford Warren, then dean of the School of Architecture—Baker had close ties with the American Arts and Crafts movement, in particular its instantiation as the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston (SACB). A who's who of the city's Brahmin class, SACB was the nation's preeminent craft institution, publisher of the influential national journal *Handicraft* and sponsor of a range of exhibitions, gallery shows, and handicraft shops in Boston and beyond. As I argue below, Baker's 47 Workshop borrows significantly from American Arts and Crafts ideology. Specifically, Baker adapts what I term a "craft ideal" that animates both SACB and the American Arts and Crafts movement generally; in its simplest form, this ideal maintains that the worker's engaged, expressive labor should at the same time adhere fastidiously to technical standards like those enforced by pre-industrial guilds. In terms later popularized by Thorstein Veblen, the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal reconciled an instinct for "idle curiosity"—the pursuit of knowledge as a "self-legitimating end of endeavor in itself"—with an "instinct of workmanship" described by Veblen as a "proclivity for taking pains," a discipline which served to temper the worker's expressive impulse.[8]

This craft ideal recurs across a number of American Arts and Crafts initiatives. The SACB journal *Handicraft* enshrines in its founding "Principles of Handicraft" the development of "individual character in connection with artistic work" while simultaneously advocating "thorough

[7] Wisney Payne Kinne, *George Pierce Baker and the American Theatre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 166.

[8] Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 39, 43. Thorstein Veblen, *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 33.

technical training, and a just appreciation of standards." Gustav Stickley's *The Craftsman*, likewise, maintains that in craftwork "interest and a pleasurable excitement are awakened in the workman," but also recommends a revamped system of "primary education" to elevate the worker's "general intelligence." Both aspects of the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal find expression in a 1903 editorial by Harvard art professor and SACB member Denman Ross, who explains in *Handicraft* that "the artistic impulse which would lead us to produce good and beautiful work is fruitless, so long as it is divorced from manual and technical training."[9] In the 47 Workshop, too, Baker and his colleagues tempered the expressive labor of the playwright with those technical standards maintained by "work committees" regulating everything from make-up to set design to stage lighting. Undoing the division between manual and mental labor, Workshop productions were further subjected, once complete, to intensive technical critique from their audiences, with audience members themselves selected only after rigorous screening. Like the American Arts and Crafts movement generally, the 47 Workshop mobilized this craft ideal as a challenge to an evolving industrial-corporate economy; specifically, Baker employed the Workshop both as a means of disrupting an increasingly utilitarian Harvard curriculum—one geared toward churning out a rising professional-managerial class—as well as a proving ground for well-crafted dramatic productions that might supplant the degraded fare of the commercial theater. "The play's the thing," Baker repeatedly stressed, succinctly articulating his approach to drama as a constructive process—as "stagecraft" in every sense of that word.[10]

In tracing the discipline to an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal, I advance a distinct genealogy for creative writing, one that departs in important ways from standard scholarly accounts. Most significantly, by attending to the cultural resonances of the notion of workshop, I foreground the

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[9] Society of Arts and Crafts, *Handicraft* 1, no. 1 (April, 1902): NP. United Crafts of Eastwood, N.Y., "Foreword" *The Craftsman* 1, no. 1 (October, 1901): ii. Denman Ross, "The Arts and Crafts: A Diagnosis," *Handicraft* 1, no. 10 (January, 1903): 237.

[10] George Pierce Baker, "The 47 Workshop," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech Education* V, no. 3 (May, 1919): 187.

wider aesthetic, social, and economic consequences involved in the figuration of writing as craft. Focusing on sites where the relation between labor and literature was explicitly contested—Baker's 47 Workshop, feminist novelist Meridel Le Sueur's workshops at the Minnesota Labor School, poet Robert Duncan's pedagogy at Black Mountain College—I chart the implications of craft rhetoric as it evolves across the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If workshop begins, for Baker, as an alternative, non-rationalized discourse and mode of labor, by mid-century it functions to reinscribe the very professional-managerial ethos that Baker opposed. As an evolving industrial-corporate regime yields around mid-century to new "informational-corporate" economies—what management consultant Peter Drucker designated the "knowledge economy"—an explosion in graduate creative writing programs helps consolidate the authority of elite educational institutions.[11] Such programs, I show, ensure the university's power as the central licensing agency in literary culture, transforming the creative writing classroom into a closed guild through which literary apprentices pass on their way—quite literally—to "master" status. In a postwar era of escalated credentialing and contracting arts economies, the professionalizing institution of the workshop constitutes one line of force, therefore, in what Pierre Bourdieu identifies as the struggle "to impose the dominant definition of the writer," at the same time delimiting the population of writers licensed to take part in that struggle.[12] Despite creative writing scholar Mark McGurl's contention that craft rhetoric served in the postwar era merely as a pedagogical "adjustment"—a modification which "separate[d] the question of talent and originality, which cannot be taught, from the question of technique, which can"—I argue that the practice of craft engages major transhistorical issues involving labor, education, and aesthetic and economic production.[13] How have we lost sight of these issues, I ask? How have scholars of the discipline ignored the fact that creative writing—unlike the composition

[11] See Peter Drucker, *The Age of Discontinuity: Guidelines to Our Changing Society* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 263-286.
[12] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 42.
[13] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 93.

and literature departments adjacent to it, unlike journalism—is practiced within a "workshop," with all that that term entails?[14]

Indeed, from Laurence Veysey's 1965 *The Emergence of the American University* to Eric Bennett's 2015 *Workshops of Empire*, scholars of creative writing have been remarkably unified in eschewing what we might think of as Foucauldian analysis of the broader imbrication of knowledge and power. Though these figures and others identify various influences on the discipline, they alike regard creative writing as a passive formation that merely refracts—rather than shapes, intervenes in, and contributes to—the consolidation of larger economic forces. For Veysey, the first to attend to creative writing—albeit briefly—in the context of the American university, the discipline emerges around the turn of the century out of a utilitarian or professionalizing impulse in institutions like Harvard and New York University. "The dominant characteristic of the new American universities," Veysey argues, "was their ability to shelter specialized departments of knowledge," departments which "represented vocational aspirations" and which realized the "desire for a practical version of higher learning."[15] In her 1993 *A History of Professional Writing Instruction in American Colleges*, Katherine H. Adams draws on Veysey's work in order to track the emergence of creative writing, more narrowly, to advanced composition courses that were themselves part of an emphasis on professional education. "Like agriculture, engineering, home economics, and other fields, writing began to be viewed as a set of skills to master in college and apply in specific careers," Adams explains. "Teachers thus began to approach writing through its professional manifestations, primarily as creative writing, magazine and newspaper writing, business writing, and technical

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[14] Though he focuses on the curricular relationship between creative writing and composition, Tim Mayers does buck the trend in creative writing scholarship in arguing that "*craft*, by virtue of its seeming ubiquity, is one of the most important words in the discourse about creative writing in America." See Tim Mayers, *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 33.

[15] Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 142.

writing."[16] A second line of thinking, in contrast, finds creative writing descending from nearly the opposite impulse. For Gerald Graff, creative writing was part of a broader movement to install more cultural criticism that might oppose the narrow specialization of philology, biography, and professional writing, modes of inquiry so-called "generalists" perceived as overly scientific and contributive to a growing utilitarianism in literary study. Advocates of creative writing, Graff argues, "saw themselves as the upholders of spiritual values against the crass materialism of American business life, of which the 'production' ethos of the philologists was for them only another manifestation."[17] Graff's student, D. G. Myers, likewise argues that creative writing begins with the objection of cultural critics to more professional forms of scholarship. "Creative writing arose in opposition to the German research ideal," Myers contends, "and as such it was originally conceived not as a *Wissenschaft*—a medium for producing and expanding knowledge—but as a *Bildung*, a way of cultivating students' appreciation of the literary art."[18] Despite his identification of creative writing as a constructive practice, Myers does not engage creative writing craft more directly, documenting the institutional history of the discipline but demurring on more ideological assessment.

What makes McGurl's 2009 *The Program Era* such an important contribution to creative writing scholarship is its side-stepping of this overly rigid genealogical binary. For McGurl, creative writing enters mainstream education neither through specialized professional pedagogies nor more cultural forms of literary study, but as part of the early twentieth-century progressive education movement, a pedagogical approach that found in the discipline a conducive medium for students' self-expression. "Responsive to a growing concern that institutions, left to their own devices, make for problematically 'institutional' subjectivities," McGurl explains, "progressive educators worked to re-gear American schools for the systematic production of original persons—more than a few of

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[16] Katherine H. Adams, *A History of Professional Writing Instruction in American Colleges* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1993), 61-62.
[17] Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 1987), 85.
[18] D. G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 5.

whom would actually become the most celebrated form of the self-expressive individual, the writer."[19] Creative writing craft enters McGurl's narrative only belatedly, therefore, as part of an effort within postwar writing programs to impose constraints on writers' unfettered self-expression. In McGurl's words, "the need for such an adjustment in progressive creativity doctrine became pressing when, as creative writing entered the professional-vocational domain of graduate education, its sponsors and practitioners began to care more for the quality of the works created than for the quality of the educational experience of which they are the occasion."[20] McGurl devotes special attention to the imposition of these constraints at the first and most iconic of postwar programs in creative writing: the Iowa Writers' Workshop (IWW). On one hand, McGurl explains, the IWW embodied "a new hospitality to self-expressive creativity on the part of progressive-minded universities." On the other hand, creative writers "rationalized their presence in a scholarly environment by asserting their own disciplinary rigor."[21] For McGurl, the workshop at Iowa serves as a case study in the kind of "programmatic self-expression" that would come to characterize the practice of creative writing throughout the Program Era and into the present, from Ithaca to Irvine, from Providence to Palo Alto.

Though much of what follows is indebted to McGurl's groundbreaking reassessment of creative writing, one fundamental claim of this project is that what McGurl calls "programmatic self-expression" in fact names an earlier ethos integral to creative writing workshops then and now: an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal. As I've suggested, that ideal promoted fastidious—if not quite "programmatic"—adherence to technical standards while also allowing for the craftsman's engaged, even expressive labor. Creative writing emerged from this cluster of values—not from the expressivist ethos of progressive education, but from the *constructivist* ethos of the American Arts and

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[19] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 83.
[20] Ibid., 93.
[21] Ibid., 129-130.

Crafts movement, an initiative which reflexively foregrounded the formal and material construction of texts and textiles, poetry and pottery.[22] Indeed, Baker's pedagogy in the 47 Workshop establishes an anti-expressive ethos that recurs throughout the subsequent history of creative writing. From Baker student John Dos Passos and his notion of "the writer as technician" to Robert Duncan's surrender to the material resistances of language, the writers I take up in this project insist that the literary artist's expressive impulse be tempered by the imposition of external constraints, whether formal, material, spiritual, or otherwise. As craft sociologist Richard Sennett describes, this tempering of expression is a hallmark of craft practices; "resistance and ambiguity can be instructive experiences," Sennett relates, since "to work well, every craftsman has to learn from these experiences rather than fight them."[23] From this perspective, the well-trafficked debate as to whether the creative writing workshop stifles individual genius—whether, that is, MFA programs simply reproduce ad infinitum the "workshop lyric" or "McPoem"—seems strikingly moot. This is their very purpose.[24]

If Gerald Graff argues, therefore, that American literary study is marked by a "series of conflicts" that failed "to find visible institutional expression," I hope to show in this project how those conflicts were mediated by—and indeed found expression within—the creative writing workshop.[25] Extending an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal, workshop reconciled self-expression and technical rigor, coordinated antithetical concerns over beauty and utility, and both refracted and propelled broader economic transformations across the first half of the twentieth century. Recovering the craft legacy of creative writing, in other words, helps us read the writing workshop as

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[22] My notion of a "constructivist ethos" derives from Barrett Watten's similar concept of a "constructivist aesthetics." See Barrett Watten, *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), xv-xxx.

[23] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 10.

[24] For description of the stereotypical "workshop lyric," see David Dooley, "The Contemporary Workshop Aesthetic," *The Hudson Review* 43, no. 2 (Summer, 1990), 259-280. For more on the "McPoem," see Donald Hall, "Poetry and Ambition," Academy of American Poets, https://poets.org/text/poetry-and-ambition.

[25] Graff, *Professing Literature*, 14.

a transitional institution, one which resisted the increasing hegemony of new industrial-corporate and informational-corporate regimes even as, in other ways, it labored those regimes into existence.

In the transitional role it played in the evolution of the American economy, the creative writing workshop seems prefigured by the real historical workshop it metaphorizes, itself a transitional space between craft and industry, past and future—before the "workshop" was the workshop.

Reworking Craft: A Critical History

"Craft" itself remains an amorphous term, of course, designating simultaneously a set of ideologies, a system of knowledge, and work practices that have continuously evolved over time. In this project, I employ the term in two ways, drawing on historical and theoretical conceptions of craft in order to delineate as sharply as possible its invocation within—and implications for—the creative writing workshop. First and most rigidly, "craft" designates a craft ideal, referring to that ethos which tempers the craftsman's expressive labor with technical rigor. Describing this ideal, craft theorist Howard Risatti treats craftsmanship as "existing with the realm of *poiesis*" since in it "technical skill and creative imagination come together."[26] The second sense in which I employ "craft" is more capacious, connoting a cluster of interrelated values, practices, attitudes, and affects. Craft in this second sense names a traditional "way of doing things" involving hand labor that "actually *informs* the craft object."[27] Craft names a "desire to do a job well for its own sake," the "special human condition of being *engaged*."[28] As C. Wright Mills explains in his 1951 *White Collar*, in craft "[t]here is an inner relation between the craftsman and the thing he makes, from the image he first forms of it through its completing, which […] makes the craftsman's will-to-work spontaneous and even exuberant." It is Mills, perhaps, whose definition of craft speaks most closely

[26] Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 168.
[27] Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (New York: Berg, 2007), 4. Risatti, *A Theory of Craft*, 108.
[28] Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 9, 20.

to the more expansive sense in which I invoke the term. "Craftsmanship as a fully idealized model of work gratification involves six major features," Mills describes.

> There is no ulterior motive in work other than the product being made and the processes of its creation. The details of daily work are meaningful because they are not detached in the worker's mind from the product of the work. The worker is free to control his own working action. The craftsman is thus able to learn from his work; and to use and develop his capacities and skills in its prosecution. There is no split of work and play, or work and culture. The craftsman's way of livelihood determines and infuses his entire mode of living.[29]

That Mills turns to craft in the immediate postwar era is indicative, I will show, of the broader institutionalization of craft rhetoric like "workshop;" for Mills was hardly alone in turning back to an idealized mode of labor at an historical moment when such labor seemed all but irrelevant to the American economy. While in what follows I pressure his investment in craft rhetoric, Mills's notion of craft as meaningful work significantly informs my own use of the term to designate a mode of labor antithetical to evolving industrial-corporate and informational-corporate regimes.

In its conceptualization of literary craftsmanship, the creative writing workshop invokes many of the values Mills describes. The real historical institution from which the workshop draws its name, however, rarely witnessed this kind of labor. Despite its association with earlier forms of guild craftsmanship—an anachronism reproduced in the practice of "craft" in the writing "workshop"—the historical workshop marked a transition between skilled hand craftsmanship and the alienated, proto-industrial work of the factory; indeed in many cases workshop labor was characterized by machine production, thorough subdivision of labor, and employee management practices strikingly reminiscent of later economic eras. Speaking to the transitional nature of workshop—a site which endured from the feudal era through the nineteenth century—Marilyn Palmer explains that workers could still "control the rhythm and intensity of the process by which the product was manufactured, something that became impossible under the factory system." Yet workshops also "depended on

[29] C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), 220.

the subdivision of the production process into a number of distinct operations, each of which could be carried out by different operatives."[30] Alert to its transitional nature, both Marx and Veblen devote significant attention to the workshop as a key site in the development of modern capitalism. Within his discussion of surplus value in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx finds in the workshop the "decomposition" of holistic craft labor into "successive manual operations." "This workshop, the product of the division of labor in manufacture," Marx describes, "produced in its turn—machines. It is they that sweep away the handicraftsman's work as the regulating principle of social production."[31] Veblen echoes Marx's narrative in arguing that in the workshop craftsmanship "passes over into the regime of the machine industry when its technology ha[s] finally outgrown those limitations of handicraft […] that gave it its character as a distinct phase of economic history."[32] Far from some medieval other to capital, workshop names a critical waypoint in capitalist development, a juncture as contested in sixteenth-century textile shops, for instance, as it remains in the creative writing classroom.

The association of workshop with craft labor, however—in the creative writing workshop but also, I suspect, within American culture generally—is attributable according to craft scholars to a nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement which idealized craft labor at the expense of historical accuracy. Edward Lucie-Smith's influential 1981 *The Story of Craft* exemplifies this line of thinking. "Neither piece-work nor factory conditions were unknown to the European Middle Ages," Lucie-

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[30] Marilyn Palmer, "The Workshop: Type of Building or Method of Work?," in *The Vernacular Workshop: From Craft to Industry, 1400-1900*, eds. P. S. Barnwell, Marilyn Palmer, and Malcolm Airs (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2004), 2. For more on the transitional nature of historical workshops, see P. S. Barnwell, "Workshops, Industrial Production and the Landscape," in *The Vernacular Workshop: From Craft to Industry, 1400-1900*, eds. P. S. Barnwell, Marilyn Palmer, and Malcolm Airs (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2004), 172-182; Laura Rigal, *The American Manufactory: Art, Labor, and The World of Things in the Early Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 14; and Heather Swanson, *Medieval Artisans: An Urban Class in Late Medieval England* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 122-145.

[31] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I* (New York: Random House, 1906), 371, 404.

[32] Veblen, *The Instinct of Workmanship*, 232. With his flair for the acerbic, Veblen argues that as workshop gives way to pecuniary interests, "workmanship comes to be confused with salesmanship, until tact, effrontery and prevarication have come to serve as a standard of efficiency, and unearned gain is accepted as the measure of productiveness." See Veblen, *The Instinct of Workmanship*, 348-349.

Smith explains, "though the late medieval guild system was so frequently idolized by Ruskin and his disciples." It is a mistake, Lucie-Smith goes on, "to talk of an innocent pre-industrial age followed by a corrupt industrial one. If there was ever a departure from a kind of pre-technological Eden, it took place so gradually in many crafts that those who were departing did not notice the fact."[33] Glenn Adamson ratifies Lucie-Smith's argument in his 2013 *The Invention of Craft*, contending that "craft was invented *as an absence*. It came into being as a figure of cancellation, an 'X' marking a spot that never existed in the first place."[34] Less commonly acknowledged among craft scholars, however, is the extent to which Arts and Crafts ideologues recognized the economically nuanced and historically plastic character of craft practices, including the transitional role of workshop. To cite only one well-known example, William Morris explains in "Art Under Plutocracy" that commercialism "destroyed the craft system of labor, in which, as aforesaid, the unit of labor is a fully instructed craftsman [and] supplanted it by […] the workshop-system, wherein, when complete, division of labor in handiwork is carried to the highest point possible."[35] If craft theorists and scholars unfairly stereotype craft adherents as poorly historicizing, doe-eyed naïfs, they likewise tend to denigrate the *American* Arts and Crafts movement as simply a meliorist initiative designed to ease workers into—and distract them from—new and more demanding regimes of labor. For T. J. Jackson Lears, American Arts and Crafts initiatives drew back from "fundamental social change" or the creation of a "truly alternative culture," instead adjusting workers to "bureaucratic hierarchies" by providing therapeutic outlets for their otherwise suppressed creativity.[36] For Leslie Greene Bowman, craft objects were "packaged […] into a consumer proposition," while for Eileen Boris

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33 Lucie-Smith, *The Story of Craft*, 14, 13.
34 Adamson, *The Invention of Craft*, 184.
35 William Morris, "Art Under Plutocracy," in *Political Writings of William Morris*, ed. A. L. Morton (New York: International, 1973), 71.
36 Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 79.

craft "could never generate a truly oppositional culture."[37] In charging its adherents with both historical ignorance and capitalist collusion, craft scholars ignore, I suggest, the wide variegation within the British and American Arts and Crafts movements, downplaying, too, the far-reaching effects of those movements.

Just as this project challenges standard genealogies of creative writing, then, on another front it rethinks interpretations of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century craftsmanship—from pottery shops to community theater—that view craft initiatives as mere meliorist practices, vents for pent-up social and economic resentment. Forgoing a morality tale between craft and industry, I reveal the dynamic give-and-take between craft adherents and the forces of industrialization they opposed. A second fundamental claim of this project, therefore, is that not all non-radical responses to the plight of American workers constituted appeasement or what Lears calls "accommodation," a with-us-or-against-us mentality that too easily abandons the vast middle ground in which the majority of cultural formations play out. In this project, I show how that middle ground was occupied by the creative writing workshop. While Baker's opposition to an evolving industrial-corporate economy stopped short, for instance, of the early radicalism of his student John Dos Passos—and certainly never attained the level of commitment demonstrated by a writer like Meridel Le Sueur—Baker pointedly and repeatedly challenged the priorities of that economy as well as of the professional-managerial ethos that fueled it. Tracking creative writing as its alternative potential is absorbed—though never anesthetized—by evolving industrial -and informational-corporate economies, I contend that "workshop" names a meaningful struggle over workers' self-determination, a struggle that manifests in a number of worker-writer initiatives programmatically written out of standard histories. Though in hindsight that struggle can seem a *fait accompli*—with horse-and-buggy

[37] Bowman, *American Arts and Crafts*, 3-4. Eileen Boris, "'Dreams of Brotherhood and Beauty': The Social Ideas of the Arts and Crafts Movement," in *'The Art that is Life': The Arts & Crafts Movement in America, 1875-1920*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (Boston: Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 1987), 209.

craftsmanship inevitably overtaken by the piston-powered engine of change—this project argues that the struggle was real, that a number of workshops played host, in fact, to significant aesthetic and economic labor during this period, and that the value of that labor has been vastly underappreciated.

For if craft adherents like Morris idealized pre-industrial labor, they did so in response to an historical moment in which craft skills and knowledge were increasingly expropriated for the benefit of an economic elite. As Michael Denning and others make clear, the emergence of industrial-corporate economies—or what has otherwise passed as "managerial capitalism" or "rationalized corporate structures"—depended to a large degree on the abstraction of technical knowledge formerly the province of craft laborers.[38] "Not only did the Taylorism of modernity accentuate the division between […] mental and manual labor," Denning argues, "but it created entire industries and classes built on 'mental labor' and the appropriation of the skills of the craftworker."[39] As new forms of abstract, technical, administrative, and otherwise professional labor emerged alongside and to manage increasingly complex economic enterprises, craft privileges and epistemologies were gradually stripped away. In the words of historian Harry Braverman, "the capitalist consolidated his powers in society and demolished the juridical features of pre-capitalist social formations."[40] As I argue below, that process was facilitated by the American university, in particular by a creative writing workshop which dismantled craft and reconstructed it in its own image. Integral to that process, moreover, was the exposure of craft "mysteries"—from *misterium*, for "professional skill"—once bound securely within so-called "craft books." Circulated within pre-industrial guilds, these texts cloaked in the mantle of self-protective jargon the mysteries of forging and swordsmithing, of

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[38] Chandler, *The Visible Hand*, 1. Mills, *White Collar*, 106.
[39] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997), 38.
[40] Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974, 60.

lace-weaving, woodworking, and shoemaking. Texts like Vannoccio Biringuccio's sixteenth-century *De la pirotechnia* and Benvenuto Cellini's *Trattati dell'oreficeria*, for example, were forerunners of literary craft books like Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town* and Mary Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook*, maintaining technical standards and regulating admission to guilds and workshops.[41] Though I explore the genre in more detail in my fourth chapter, I gesture briefly here to how the restricted circulation of craft books gave way, in time, to texts explicitly conceived for public audiences, including a professional-managerial technocracy which would mobilize craft epistemologies against workers themselves. I demonstrate too how the expropriation of craft bears on the history of creative writing.

While Adamson traces the exposure of craft mysteries to Diderot's 1751 *Encyclopédie*, one could just as easily date the process to the Baconian scientific method of the early seventeenth century.[42] Criticizing the continued separation of mental and manual labor, Francis Bacon, acting in his capacity as Lord Chancellor, emphasized how crucial the tacit knowledge at the heart of guild craftsmanship was to British imperialism. Craft-based ways of making and knowing, Bacon declared in his 1620 *Novum organum*, constituted "literate experience" that must be inspected, described, and institutionalized so that proper use might be made of it. Modeling the notion after craft epistemologies, Bacon described "literate experience" as a "kind of sagacity," an exclusive disposition previously uncultivated within mainstream academic institutions, but which, if "put in writing," might redound to the benefit of both Britain and her colonies.[43] Bacon thus sought to expropriate both the content of craft practices as well as their form, the ethos with which those practices were carried out. His call for the public exposure of craft resulted in a number of craft

[41] In Helen Clifford's view, craft books served less as codices of craft mysteries—information protected by guild rules and unlikely to be written down in the first place—than as promotional material to impress potential clients. See Helen Clifford, "Making Luxuries: The Image and Reality of Luxury Workshops in 18th-Century London," in *The Vernacular Workshop: From Craft to Industry, 1400-1900*, eds. P. S. Barnwell, Marilyn Palmer, and Malcolm Airs (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2004), 20.

[42] See Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 59.

[43] Quoted in Cesare Pastorini, "The Philosopher and the Craftsman: Francis Bacon's Notion of Experiment and Its Debt to Early Stuart Inventors," *Isis* 108, no. 4 (2017), 754.

books written exclusively for learned audiences, the kind of philosopher-scientists with whom Bacon associated in his various courtly roles. In his 1707 *Silva*, for instance, gardener John Evelyn cautioned that he "did not altogether compile this Work for the Sake of our Ordinary Rusticks (meer Forestors and Woodmen), but for the more Ingenious, the benefit and diversion of Gentlemen, the Persons of Quality."[44] Craft books also began to be written, however, for wider audiences of curious workers. Joseph Moxon's 1678 *Mechanick exercises* explained skills such as blacksmithing, joinery, and carpentry "in workmen's phrases and their terms explained."[45] An hydrographer and mathematician based in Cornhill "at the sign of the Atlas," Moxon explicitly framed his *Mechanick* as a response to Bacon's call for the demystification of craft.[46] "The Lord Bacon, in his Natural History, reckons that Philosophy would be improved by having the Secrets of all Trades lye open," Moxon writes. Moxon himself agreed, "not only because Experimental Philosophy is Coucht amongst them," he explained, "but also [because] the Trades themselves might, by a Philosopher, be improv'd."[47] An explicit challenge to guild control of craft labor, Moxon's *Mechanick* earned him election into the Royal Society the very year of its publication.

On one hand, such a text might be understood as democratizing manual labor practices, Moxon believing—perhaps nobly—that all British culture owed to and might benefit from craft experiences made "literate." "That Geometry, Astronomy, Perspective, Musick, Navigation, Architecture, &c. are excellent Sciences, all that know but their very Names will confess," Moxon reasoned.

> Yet to what purpose would Geometry serve, were it not to contrive Rules for Handy-Works? Or how could Astronomy be known to any perfection, but by Instruments made by Hand? What Perspective should we have to delight our Sight? What Musick to ravish our Ears? What Navigation to Guard and Enrich our Country? Or what Architecture to defend us from the Inconveniences of different

[44] Quoted in Clifford, "Making Luxuries," 20.

[45] Joseph Moxon, *Mechanick exercises: or, the Doctrine of handy-works* (London: Daniel Midwinter and Thomas Leigh, 1703), NP.

[46] John Knox Laughton, "Moxon, Joseph," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* 39, accessed December 9, 2019, http://www.-oxforddnb-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/.

[47] Moxon, *Mechanick exercises*, NP.

Weather, without Manual Operations?[48]

For Moxon, as for Bacon before him, craft practices undergirded nearly every aspect of cultural and scientific experience, making the exposure of craft secrets nothing less than a matter of national security.[49] On the other hand, it is a short intellectual leap from Bacon and Moxon's abstraction of craft skills for the benefit of a scientific elite to something like Frederick Winslow Taylor's expropriation of craft ways of making and knowing under "scientific management." Helen Clifford argues as much in her local history of London workshops. "It may be no coincidence," Clifford writes, "that it is from [the seventeenth century] that the power of the guilds began to decline, and the forces of innovation (as applied to organization, methods of manufacture, and product types) began to be felt."[50] Bacon himself seems to anticipate precisely this shift in craft practices, calling the exposure of craft secrets a "*traductio*"—a "transfer" or "translation." As in any financial exchange, much indeed was being transferred.[51] And that term also carries in its history another association relevant to the abstraction and redeployment of craft epistemologies; from the Latin for "to lead along as a spectacle," "traduce" refers to those forms of scorn in which wrongdoers were paraded publically before their accusers. "Traduce," in this sense, connotes a type of defamation or slander. The word is related to "traitor."[52]

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[48] Ibid., NP.

[49] So integral was the exposure and dissemination of craft practices to British imperialism that, by the nineteenth century, craft books instructing would-be Gothic architects were distributed to colonies in India and the Americas, a trans-oceanic craft network ripe for scholarly research. One such text, the *Instrumenta Ecclesiastica*, included designs and trace-patterns for everything from door handles to coffin lids. See Kathleen Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 34.

[50] Clifford, "Making Luxuries," 20.

[51] Quoted in Pastorini, "The Philosopher and the Craftsman," 755. Another seventeenth-century craft book similarly suggests the stakes of this moment, with John Darling declaring in his 1685 *The Carpenter's Rule made easie* that it was amateur workmen "for whose sake chiefly I have this time exposed [craft secrets] to publick view." See John Darling, *The Carpenter's Rule made easie: or, the Art of Measuring Superficies and Solids* (London: George Sawbridge, 1694), A4v.

[52] "*Oxford English Dictionary, s.v.* "traduce, v.," accessed February 21, 2020.

Craft University

It would be impossible, admittedly, to date the expropriation of craft—and the attendant transformation of work into the drudgery experienced by the majority of global workers—to a single historical moment. Certainly by the nineteenth century, however, craft knowledge had migrated from closely regulated guilds and workshops to factory management offices and those financial markets which underwrote them. The exposure of craft mysteries, Glenn Adamson has argued, "was infused with the triumphal logic of modern technology."[53]

As I've noted, the installation of that technology required a professional-managerial class capable of coordinating rationalized, vertically integrated, and ever more bureaucratic industrial-corporate enterprises. The American university was the primary production site, therefore, for a new cadre of executives whose work it would be to instrumentalize craft knowledge.[54] Scholars working across a range of disciplines have recognized the integral role of the university in the evolution of industrial-corporate and informational-corporate economies. Historians Barbara and John Ehrenreich argue that the university is the "historical reproductive apparatus" *par excellence* of the professional-managerial class. Performance studies theorist Shannon Jackson explains that the "modern concept of 'discipline' […] arose when the discursive strain of professional expertise met the exigencies of a restructuring university."[55] Sociologist Daniel Bell reads the university as the "axial structure" in economies organized around "intellectual technology."[56] Indeed, the integration of the university within broader corporate regimes was explicitly promoted by the federal government throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from the Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 to the 1980

[53] Adamson, *The Invention of Craft*, 57.
[54] See Ethan Schrum, *The Instrumental University: Education in Service of the National Agenda After World War II* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).
[55] Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 16.
[56] Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 26, 28.

passage of the Bayh-Dole Act, which cleared way for the patenting and marketing of university research.[57]

By mid-century, the creative writing workshop itself served as a key distribution point for those professional-managerial discourses on which the American economy depended. Inducting student writers—who are almost always student-workers—into the closed guild of the graduate workshop, craft rhetoric ensures that only properly "professional" writers have access to the literary marketplace. Thus, it is not only in its transitional nature that the writing workshop resembles its historical predecessor, but in its procedures and pedagogies as well; for the process by which students matriculate into the marketplace shares striking similarities with the proto-industrial workshop, similarities which further suggest the writing classroom as a pivotal site in the expropriation of craft epistemologies. As Richard Sennett describes, "in a workshop, the skills of the master can earn him or her the right to command, and learning from and absorbing those skills can dignify the apprentice or journeyman's obedience."[58] The "master" of the creative writing workshop, of course, is the published writer who serves as professor, a figure whose charismatic presence—not to mention cultural cachet and professional connections—can "dignify" by association the work of his or her students. For Sennett, moreover, the craftsman's workshop is "one site in which the […] conflict between autonomy and authority plays out."[59] Within the creative writing workshop, would-be writers are asked to cultivate individual expression while at the same time demonstrating proficiency in those technical standards promoted by the authoritative master, a balance at the heart of the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal. And the way student-writers demonstrate their proficiency is the MFA thesis, akin to the "masterpiece" by which craft

[57] See Daniel Lee Kleinman, "The Commercialization of Academic Culture and the Future of the University," in *The Commodification of Academic Research: Science and the Modern University*, ed. Hans Radder (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 28.
[58] Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 54.
[59] Ibid., 80.

apprentices become journeymen. Even such a notorious creative writing shibboleth as "show don't tell" originates in the proto-industrial workshop, as the master's visual demonstration provides a imitable model for the apprentice's work.[60]

In short, creative writing craft refigures abstract economic practices as the most material or "blue-collar" of labors, veiling the promotion of professional-managerial values in ostensibly neutral—and natural—writing pedagogies. If Pierre Bourdieu argues that "the culture [the university] transmits is largely that of the dominant classes," that dominant culture comes packaged in a falsely nostalgic lexicon evocative of work practices which the university itself has helped to render obsolete.[61] The workshop poem or short story, this is to say, shares discursive space with the "craft" IPA or "hand-loomed" Pottery Barn rug; in this space, one kind of economic practice rewrites itself in the language of another, just as right-wing corporatism can rewrite itself in the demotic language of populism. As Bourdieu notes of mass-produced couture craft—YETI coolers and Pendleton blankets being, as of this writing, two conspicuous examples—"nothing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even 'common.'"[62] While instructors of creative writing will reminisce fondly about their most talented students, these instructors will also tell you that there is hardly anything more "banal or even 'common'" than the majority of student writing. Yet these same instructors, myself not excepted, continuously peddle notions of student writing that idealizes their work as rigorous craftsmanship—not tedious paperwork en route toward a fungible credential, but close, careful construction in the building blocks of language. This project is about thinking through the slippage in that metaphor.

The graduate writing workshop was only one manifestation, however, of a widespread

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[60] Ibid., 181.

[61] Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 23.

[62] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 5.

fascination with craft rhetoric around mid-century, rhetoric which exploded precisely at the time a new informational-corporate regime was entrenching itself at the heart of the "American Century." C. Wright Mills's 1959 *The Sociological Imagination*, for instance, advocates craftsmanship as an idealized model of the kind of flexible thinking integral to the sociologist's work. "Be a good craftsman," Mills advises his readership of would-be sociologists. "Avoid any rigid set of procedures. […] Avoid the fetishism of method and technique. […] Let every man be his own methodologist; let every man be his own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of a craft." Balancing the sociologist's expressive labor with the technical "perfection of his craft," Mills's sociologist embodies an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal and carries it forward into an unexpected context. "The most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community you have chosen to join do not split their work from their lives," Mills insists. "They seem to take both too seriously to allow such dissociation."[63] Admirable, perhaps, in its invocation of a pre-industrial harmony between work and leisure, Mills's white-collar craftsmanship at the same time ensures that mental laborers internalize and extend throughout their lives the professional-managerial ethos of the university. While the proto-industrial workshop did serve, in some cases, as the home of the miller or textile-maker or small-scale manufacturer, the obscuring of boundaries between work and leisure also means that mental laborers—like most university employees—never punch out, that they are susceptible at any moment to the midnight phone call or emergency e-mail. This infiltration of postwar labor into every aspect of existence looks far less insidious when it goes by the name of "craftsmanship."

Bourdieu, for one, is keenly alert to this dynamic when he explains that "there is no area of practice in which the aim of purifying, refining and sublimating primary needs and impulses"—the need to earn a living, for instance—"cannot assert itself, no area in which the stylization of life […]

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[63] C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 224, 196, 195.

does not produce the same effects."[64] In this way, Mills's sociologist figures forth what William H. Whyte three years earlier had called "the organization man," that figure whose internalization of corporate values—especially, for Whyte, a guild-like sense of corporate belonging—"is like nothing so much as the Middle Ages." "The job [of organizations], to paraphrase, is to *re-create* the belongingness of the Middle Ages," Whyte explains.

> What with the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and other calamities, the job is immensely more difficult than it was in those simpler days. But with new scientific techniques, we can solve the problem. What we must do is to learn consciously to achieve what once came naturally. We must form an elite of skilled leaders who will guide men back, benevolently, to group belongingness.[65]

Whyte's striking deployment of craft rhetoric reveals how evolving economic regimes not only abstracted and expropriated craft epistemologies but forced them back upon American workers as a kind of new age corporate communalism. For it is a short step from Mills's sociologist to the practice of "managerial craftsmanship" promoted by Eugene Bardach in a 1998 Brookings Institution report with the insipid title *Getting Agencies to Work Together: The Practice and Theory of Managerial Craftsmanship*. "[T]he leader manipulates her followers as a craftsman would manipulate her materials," Bardach explains. "To put it another way, *craftsman* and *materials* are roles in a system of strategic interactions, not personal attributes, talents, or conditions of individuals."[66] Though it would be difficult to find more succinct testimony to the expropriation of craft skills by a professional-managerial elite, Bardach's rhetoric is indicative of a wider redeployment of craft rhetoric across the twentieth century.

Of course, craft skills and practices were also incorporated quite materially into the university during this period. Spurred by passage of the G.I. Bill in 1944, programs in "studio craft" proliferated in the late 1940s and early 1950s, part of the same institutional hospitality to the arts

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[64] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 5.

[65] William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), 36, 36-37.

[66] Eugene Bardarch, *Getting Agencies to Work Together: The Practice and Theory of Managerial Craftsmanship* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 33.

that resulted, nearly contemporaneously, in the establishment of creative writing graduate programs at schools like Iowa, Johns Hopkins, and Cornell. In their early years, programs in studio craft fostered self-expressive creativity among a largely neophyte student body of returning G.I.s, an expressivist ethos exemplified most dramatically, perhaps, in sculptor and Black Mountain College instructor Peter Voulkos. Voulkous "might have seemed an eccentric figure," Adamson explains, "but he spoke for a large number of the young people who were entering the craft scene in the late 1950s. This generation had been educated in the new university programs, and they had different expectations from those who were oriented to design for industry."[67] The expressivist era of studio craft was short-lived, though. As Adamson and other craft scholars relate, by 1960 programs in craft had begun to clamp down on undisciplined self-expression, with textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen describing such work as "directionless irresponsibility—ideal soil for that kind of parasitic, fruitless individualism that impedes our cause."[68] Gradually, craft came to be redefined as a fine art, its products destined for galleries, museums, and other high-end commercial outlets. "The general pre-war concept of craft as local, amateur, handmade functional goods," Caroline M. Hannah explains, "often informed by a longing for a preindustrial era, made room for a new perception of craft as sophisticated, unique, handmade design objects that were aesthetically attuned to the contemporary tastes of a national urban/suburban market."[69] Though studio craft cuts through this project only glancingly, its redefinition as a fine art was symptomatic of and perpetuated an inherited academic contempt for craft discourses. That contempt is neatly, if unfortunately, demonstrated in the 1970 decision to change the name of the Museum of Contemporary Craft first to the American

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[67] Glenn Adamson, "Gatherings: Creating the Studio Craft Movement," in *Crafting Modernism: Midcentury American Art and Design*, ed. Jeannine Falino (New York: Museum of Arts and Design, 2012), 38.
[68] Quoted in Adamson, "Gatherings," 38.
[69] Caroline M. Hannah, "An 'Exploding Craft Market,' 1945-1969," in *Crafting Modernism: Midcentury American Art and Design*, ed. Jeannine Falino (New York: Museum of Arts and Design, 2012), 120. For more on the transformation of craft into a fine art, see Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 4-7 and Jeannine Falino, "Craft Is Art Is Craft," in *Crafting Modernism: Midcentury American Art and Design*, ed. Jeannine Falino (New York: Museum of Arts and Design, 2012), 16-31.

Craft Museum and then, in 2002, to the Museum of Arts and Design, the latter effectively denaturing—even erasing—the legacy of craft in the United States.[70]

It is this contempt for craft—which continues, I suspect, to connote for most audiences a penchant for backwoods kitsch and flea-market rubbish—that has contributed in part to scholarly disregard for the craft legacy of creative writing. This project attempts to recover that legacy. For as craft was abstracted into pedagogy and denatured into fine art, it was also taken up by a range of creative writers who found in it a value system by which to think through and sometimes protest broader economic transformations. "[E]ven as the popularity of pottery (part of the craft movement of the 1960s) lay behind its displacement from the field of art," Bill Brown has argued, "the literary register nonetheless reanimates the vitality of craft as vernacular modernism […] with all its utopian longing."[71] Ignoring links between creative writing and other forms and theories of making, scholars have ignored both the economic ramifications of the discipline as well as how creative writers themselves re-appropriated craft rhetoric. Though the American Arts and Crafts movement had fizzled out by the 1930s—a senescence I explore in more depth in the chapters that follow—the craft ideal it promoted would be taken up in multiple forms across the twentieth century, cast and recast in the foundry that was the creative writing workshop. Covering diverse forms, genres, and media—from undergraduate theater productions to proletarian novels to avant-garde visual art and the writing pedagogies it inspired—I seek in this project to restore an holistic, historically nuanced vision of that workplace.

Work Schedule

My opening chapter, accordingly, returns to the first creative writing "workshop" to use that

[70] On the renaming of the American Craft Museum, see Jo Lauria and Steve Fenton, *Craft in America: Celebrating Two Centuries of Artists and Objects* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2007), 32 and Risatti, *A Theory of Craft*, 153.

[71] Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 146.

name, the "47 Workshop" led by George Pierce Baker at Harvard University from 1912 to 1924.

Drawing on extensive archival research, I reconstruct the procedures of Baker's workshop and attend to the craft ideology informing them. For if his adoption of the term marked a calculated effort to slot arts pedagogies into Harvard's increasingly utilitarian curriculum—here, Baker insisted, was serious labor in the useful and remunerative discipline of stagecraft—"workshop" also signaled Baker's ties to an American Arts and Crafts movement then *comme il faut* among Boston's elite. Specifically, I show how Baker adapts a "craft ideal" promoted by the Society of Arts and Crafts Boston through its national journal *Handicraft*. As craft ideologues articulated it, that ideal encouraged the worker's self-expression through his labor, but also held his work to technical standards like those maintained by pre-industrial guilds. As I've suggested above, Baker translated this craft ideal into the 47 Workshop in multiple ways, the stagecraft practiced therein—including by students John Dos Passos, Eugene O'Neill, and Edward Sheldon—representing a formidable challenge to the mass-cultural productions of Broadway. In both its form and content, in other words, the 47 Workshop extended the broader Arts and Crafts opposition to regnant industrial-corporate economies.

In order to understand that intervention—to grasp the social work of workshop—I turn in the second half of this chapter to a pair of dramatic texts developed under the influence of the 47 Workshop. The first, Baker's 1930 *Control: A Pageant of Engineering Progress*, pointedly challenges the priorities of emergent industrial-corporate enterprises, leveling a sharp critique of those economic forces that would subsume aesthetic, spiritual, and ecological considerations to pecuniary motives. Written for the 50th anniversary of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, *Control* manages the difficult feat of celebrating technological innovation while warning its audience of engineers against the surrender of pre-industrial values. The pageant's climactic cinematic montage, for instance, features footage of engineering marvels such as bridges, dams, and factories accompanied

by an insistent voiceover reminder that such structures must be "ever growing in beauty."[72] Similarly, Baker's student John Dos Passos found in craft a set of values by which to oppose Broadway theater and at the same time reconsider the implications of an evolving industrial-corporate regime. Before his ascent to literary celebrity, Dos Passos was closely involved with the experimental "Little Theater Movement" in New York City, a movement made up in large part of 47 Workshop alums and committed to stagecraft as a form of economic critique. Examining his three-act play *Airways, Inc.*, I show how Dos Passos adjusts the American Arts and Crafts ideology promoted by his former teacher; for it is the aptly-named character of "Professor" who in a number of set-piece speeches envisions the transformation of the intellectual's labor from a kind of craftsmanship to a mode of technical engineering. Staged in 1929 at the New Playwrights Theater, *Airways, Inc.* routes its politics through representations of labor and laborers, staging the obsolescence of craft and the rise of new bloodless "technique." At this point in his career, Dos Passos is still working out the aesthetic and economic implications of this metaphor, but close treatment of *Airways, Inc.* reveals the foundation of a modernist technical aesthetic that Dos Passos will refine in his landmark 1933 essay "The Writer as Technician." As Baker's promotion of a craft ideal shades into Dos Passos's emphasis on technical standards, the craftsman exchanges his hammer for a drafting set.

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In the second chapter of this project, I contextualize Dos Passos's "The Writer as Technician" within the 1930s literary Left in order to show how the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal cleaves into opposing ideological factions. On one hand, writers like Dos Passos and *Partisan Review* editors Philip Rahv and William Phillips viewed the writer as a "technician" whose ultimate responsibility

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[72] George Pierce Baker, *Control: A Pageant of Engineering Progress* (NP: The American Society of Mechanical Engineers, 1930), 60.

was fastidious adherence to the standards of modernist technique. On the other hand, a second faction of the literary Left—organized around Mike Gold's *New Masses*—promoted the self-expression of proletarian writers otherwise unschooled in the literary arts. For both factions, aesthetic and ethical differences manifested through competing representations of the worker-writer, what we might schematize as a "top-down" (writers as workers) versus a "bottom-up" (workers as writers) binary. Tracking the schizophrenic inheritance of American Arts and Crafts ideology, I show how debates internal to the 1930s Left supplied key rhetoric that would influence later creative writing workshops, particularly the pedagogical promotion of imagery—metonymized as "show don't tell"—which had the effect of suppressing overtly political writing. Though scholars of creative writing like McGurl associate the discipline's anti-didactic impetus with New Critical values, it is within the 1930s Left, of all places, that we find the earliest opposition to "didactic" politicizing. The debates over such politicizing, I show, fenced out a discursive field within which the majority of 1930s writers plied their craft.

In this chapter I attend to one of those writers, Meridel Le Sueur, as a case study in how craft rhetoric informed literary production during an era in which the relationship between labor and literature was hotly contested. A creative writing instructor at the WPA-backed Minnesota Labor School in Minneapolis, Le Sueur remains an underappreciated figure in literary critical appraisals of the 1930s, her career as a feminist and proletarian writer embodying significant intellectual—and often personal—tensions with the 1930s Left. Le Sueur herself was an outspoken critic of the "inhuman" leftism she associated with Dos Passos and his *Partisan Review* coterie, preferring over lifeless technicians what she called "the vast university of the common people."[73] Accordingly, her pedagogical and documentary work with the WPA extend Gold's expressivist values, Le Sueur's 1937 textbook *Worker Writers*—written for and employed in her workshops—outfitting Minneapolis

[73] Quoted in Linda Ray Pratt, "Woman Writer in the Communist Party: The Case of Meridel Le Sueur," *Women's Studies* 14 (1998), 252. Meridel Le Sueur, *North Star Country* (New York: Book Find Club, 1945), 219.

truckers and textile workers, midwives and meatpackers with the tools of literary production. At the same time, a novel like Le Sueur's *I Hear Men Talking* complicates any potentially reductive notions of "proletarianism," revealing self-consciously modernist aspirations in its virtuosic joining of realist and lyrically experimental modes.

Though scholars have recognized the complex interplay between proletarian and modernist culture, rarely acknowledged is how modernist proletarians like Le Sueur drew on an American Arts and Crafts tradition, insisting, in fact, that modernism was built by American workers.[74] How and why, I ask in this chapter, have proletarian workshops—those taught by Le Sueur, as well as workshops organized by John Reed Clubs and other leftist initiatives—been written out of standard histories of both modernism and creative writing? What does that omission reveal about our own present-day practice of the discipline?

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If the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal cleaves into opposing factions of the 1930s Left, it also reemerges whole at Black Mountain College in 1933, where—in poetry and pottery workshops, on the college farm and kitchen detail—students' self-expression was tempered by the resistances of craft material. At Black Mountain, students and faculty understood craft as a spiritual and self-annulling discipline, a way of sublimating the expressive ego in and through materiality. What I call Black Mountain's "spiritualized craft ideal" operated on two distinct registers. First, Black Mountaineers viewed the worker's labor as a spiritual process in its own right, drawing on American Arts and Crafts ideology which maintained that intimate engagement with material facilitated freer, more authentic expression. Second, submission to craft material allowed the craftsman to embody

[74] See Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Cary Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

formally—in language, textile patterns, and agricultural work, for example—a higher, more spiritual order of creation, to access a universal plane foreclosed by more egoistic forms of making.

Attending to the ways in which the craft ideal informs—and is transformed by—the curriculum of Black Mountain College not only helps us track the evolution of American Arts and Crafts ideology, but allows us to reassess the careers of key Black Mountain figures, among them visual artists Josef and Anni Albers and poet Robert Duncan. Each of these figures, I show, conceived their pedagogies and creative practices in terms with resonant with craft overtones, describing artistic creation, for instance, as submission to material resistances in the service of a higher, spiritual order. The craftsman, as Anni Albers argued, "listen[s] for the dictation of the material" in order to "tak[e] part in an eternal order."[75] Focusing on a Black Mountain preliminary course titled "Werklehre"—literally "work teaching" or "how to work"—as well as critically neglected weavings, lithographs, and other visual art, I show how the Alberses' earlier craftwork at the Bauhaus fuses with American Arts and Crafts ideology to form a distinctly spiritualized craft ethos. "Articulation in visual form," Josef Albers called this anti-expressivist ideal. "Meaningful form," his wife Anni termed it. For Duncan, it was "significant craft," a process wherein immediate engagement with the materiality of language manifested in aesthetic form a second, more spiritual order of creation. De-privileging lyric expression, Duncan defined significant craft as "the *impulse* that informs (and makes *necessary* the artist's craft), the hidden and life-creative and destructive ID-entity underlying and overriding the conveniences of personal identity."[76] While most scholars link Duncan to Black Mountain through his association with rector Charles Olson, I contend in this chapter that Duncan's "significant craft" extends and transforms the objectives of Black Mountain College itself.

Recognizing at the same time that its spiritualized craft ideal was not merely a set of metaphors,

[75] Anni Albers, "Work with Materials," Black

[76] Robert Duncan to Denise Levertov, October 19, 1971, in *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, eds. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 665. [emphasis in original]

nor rhetorical hyperbole, I attend too to the Black Mountain "work program" in farming and construction, a labor initiative central to the aesthetic experience and financial solvency of the college. Steeped in wide-ranging research in the Black Mountain archives, this chapter treats the 1940 construction of the Bauhaus-inspired Studies Building as a limit case in the practical viability of significant craft, the capacity of actual work to open onto a higher, spiritual order. While many students and faculty bought into the Black Mountain "work mystique," others saw the program as mere drudgery, criticizing its autocratic nature and objecting to its domination of cultural life at Black Mountain.[77] Literalizing a craft ideal that found in the discipline of material resistances an avenue toward spiritual order, Black Mountain's work program prompts us to ask what happens when "significant craft" loses its significance, when work simply does not work.

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While previous chapters focus on educational institutions in which the relationship between labor and literature was particularly charged, my fourth chapter examines the creative writing "craft book" as a kind of generic institution that mediated the same relationship. Indeed, craft books played a key role in many of the educational initiatives I discuss in this project, from Baker's *Dramatic Technique* to Le Sueur's *Worker Writers* to a 1933 text, titled *Studies in Creative Writing*, published by Black Mountain instructor Robert Wunsch. Part of a "self-help" genre increasingly popular across the early twentieth century, craft books were intended to help would-be writers master the elements of literary production; as a way of doing so, they separated the writing process into constitutive "craft" techniques, guiding readers through apprenticeships in imagery, dialogue, structure, texture, and tone, among other elements. As the name of the genre suggests, moreover, craft books consistently invoke manual labor as a corollary for literary production, carrying forward a system of metaphors

[77] Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1972), 158.

that resonates in complicated ways across early twentieth-century print culture.

In this chapter, I argue that the widespread figuration of writing as work in craft books triangulated a given genre's relation to an evolving literary marketplace. While fiction craft books frame fiction as a form of fungible labor, poetry craft books insist that poetry itself constitutes more than "mere craftsmanship," that it remains a spiritual expression facilitated by—though irreducible to—technical facility.[78] Balancing the writer's self-expression with fidelity to craft techniques, the poetry craft book gave new discursive life to the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal, an ideal whose afterlives endure well beyond the movement itself. In similar fashion, poetry craft books in particular helped parse the relationship between nineteenth-century formalism and emergent modernist vernaculars, staking out a kind of "genteel" or "middlebrow" aesthetic appealing to a wide range of American audiences. As I reveal in this chapter, however, modernist writers themselves adapted the tropes of the craft book as a way of advancing their own distinctly avant-garde projects. Examining Gertrude Stein's 1931 *How to Write* and Ezra Pound's 1934 *ABC of Reading*, I read the modernist craft book as one of those "intervenient institutions" which, for a scholar like Lawrence Rainey, mediate between modernism and broader cultural forms.[79]

Though early twentieth-century craft books oppose poetry to the marketplace, poetry comes to look more and more like work—and not particularly "spiritual" work—as creative writing takes up shop in the postwar university. If craft rhetoric helps consolidate the authority of elite educational institutions, the craft book is pivotal to that process, rewriting the university's professional-managerial ethos as meaningful manual labor. Scholars of the discipline have ignored the economic implications of creative writing craft, but a craft book such as Richard Hugo's 1979 *The Triggering Town* suggests those implications clearly. "Creative writing belongs in the university for the same

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[78] Ethel M. Colson, *How To Write Poetry* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1919), 20.
[79] Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 4.

reason other subjects do," Hugo writes. "[B]ecause people will pay to study them."[80] As I demonstrate, *The Triggering Town* offers a rich diagnostic of the institutional habitus of postwar creative writing, modeling an ambivalence that extends to Hugo's contemporaneous poetry collection, *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*. Poetic craftsmanship may arrogate economic and cultural authority to the university, Hugo argues, but it also allows working-class writers entrée to those professional discourses on which economic success depends. *31 Letters* thus helps rebut the charge that the institutionalization of creative writing leads *ipso facto* to the commodification of American poetry. For Hugo's is precisely the kind of "critical art practice" that an avant-garde writer like Barrett Watten advocates, "laying bare the device of its construction" and encoding its own positionality.[81] As Hugo shows, the alignment of poetry and university opens space for a postmodernist poetics characterized by reflexive attention to its institutional being, to those values and discourses—including craft—that structure creative writing as a commodity and fetish.

Workshops of Modernism

As this brief overview indicates, a third and final fundamental claim of this project is that the invocation of work as a metaphor for literary production—in particular the appeal to what I have

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[80] Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 54.

[81] Barrett Watten, *Questions of Poetics: Language Writing and Consequences* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 8. Watten, *The Constructivist Moment*, xxiii. Christopher Beach offers a helpful survey of the objections to creative writing in his 1999 *Poetic Culture*, noting that "unlike the 1950s and 1960s, when the academic poetry 'establishment' came under fire from the emerging countercultural avant-garde, this new attack seems to have come from all angles." With more conservative writers and cultural critics—Donald Hall, Joseph Epstein, Dana Gioia—the objection to creative writing takes the form of the poetry *post mortem*, with Epstein asking "who killed poetry?" and Gioia lamenting that poetry can hardly hope to "matter" in the age of the writing workshop. On the left, avant-garde writers like Charles Bernstein, Joshua Clover, Juliana Spahr, and Watten critique what Clover and Spahr call the "division of labor in the academic factory," deriding workshop's marginalization of more experimental forms of writing. See Christopher Beach, *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry Between Community and Institution* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 21; Donald Hall, "Poetry and Ambition," https://poets.org/text/poetry-and-ambition; Joseph Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?," *Commentary* (August, 1988), https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/who-killed-poetry/; Dana Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 1992); and Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr, "The 95cent Skool," in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, ed. Joshua Marie Wilkinson (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 185-187.

called “craft rhetoric”—significantly informs the theory and practice of American literary modernism. In addition to constructing a distinct genealogy for creative writing and rethinking scholarly assessment of the American Arts and Crafts movement, this project reassesses American modernism through a labor studies lens, revealing how major modernist concerns—the relation between aesthetic and political avant gardes, notions of the artwork as a constructed object, the tactical retreat from and engagement with broader publics—come to seem inextricable from questions of labor and working-class identity. Indeed, many of those same concerns were taken up by the writers and artists I examine in this project. From Baker’s and Dos Passos’s experimental stagecraft to Le Sueur’s harnessing of a modernist prose style to proletarian politics to Stein’s parody of the popular genre of the craft book, the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal supplies the motivating logic for a series of worker-writer initiatives that might also be thought of as workshops of modernism.

Part of a scholarly “new labor history,” this project is motivated by Cary Nelson’s conviction that literature is “continually articulated and rearticulated in terms of power,” a cultural domain “that is constantly being reformed and repositioned.”[82] The creative writing workshop is a principal site within which that reformation played out, its reverberations rippling out to envelop broad segments of American culture across the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this project, I document the remarkable variegation within—yet shared craft ethos of—a body of writing traditional relegated to the margins of modernist studies. At the same time, I draw on a tradition carried forward by scholars like Michael Denning, Barbara Foley, Joseph Harrington, Paula Rabinowitz, and John Marsh, whose work linking labor and literature I invoke throughout this project. The texts I examine herein constitute part of what Harrington describes as a broader “modernist effort to shift the social form of poetry,” an effort that materializes—as Lawrence Rainey argues—through

[82] Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker*, x. Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 244.

"intervenient institutions that connect works to readerships, or readerships to particular social structures."[83] Recovering a richer sense of how modernism was crafted in creative writing workshops, moreover, is key to understanding how those institutions function in the postmodernist era—their influence on a surprisingly "postmodernist" writer like Hugo, for instance, or their implications for the increasing number of young writers who continue to hone their craft in MFA workshops.

For the MFA industry is a booming one. As of this writing, the creative writing clearinghouse *Poets & Writers* lists 158 graduate MFA programs, 64 low-residency programs, and thousands of residencies and conferences for aspiring writers. The most popular of these conferences, the annual meeting of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), has an attendance exceeding 12,000, with 800 exhibitors marketing their wares in the popular "book fair," itself a throwback to the medieval marketplace. Each year, between 3,000 and 4,000 student-writers graduate from MFA workshops, passing from apprenticeships to master status, their professional credentials—if few job prospects—securely in hand. What's more, with the rise of the creative writing Ph.D., those "masters" now face five more years of graduate study in order to compete for academic jobs. Though I am skeptical of such programs, I do not particularly feel the weight of claims that the workshop system separates American literature from a wider public, nor do I share the seemingly widespread conviction that the workshop homogenizes contemporary writing, as my reading of Hugo's work makes clear. Rather, by reconstructing the craft legacy of creative writing, I seek to clarify precisely what we talk about when we talk about "workshop"—how the institution functions in the postwar university and precisely the nature of its investment in young writers.

Similarly, while I am sympathetic to the economic challenge levied by the American Arts and Crafts movement, my interest in craft is motivated neither by wistfulness for bygone eras nor

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[83] Joseph Harrington, *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 55. Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*, 4.

idealizing notions of manual labor as somehow more "authentic" than other forms of work. This project is motivated, rather, by nostalgia for an age we have not yet labored into existence, an age in which those values associated with craft—engaged labor respective of technique and materials, infused with the spirit of play—might be extended to all labor undertaken by a now globalized workforce. That age is not yet our own. In the words of Alain de Botton, "we are now as imaginatively disconnected from the manufacture and distribution of our goods as we are practically in reach of them, a process of alienation which has stripped us of myriad opportunities for wonder, gratitude, and guilt."[84] Our ability to imagine a different age depends on attuning ourselves to discourses of labor and class currently unfashionable among literary scholars. As Constance Coiner argues, "[d]espite its place on the now-familiar list of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, class is often the least addressed of these issues. […] Indeed, few students seem even to *see* class markers."[85] This project seeks to restore to visibility, therefore, economic and cultural practices that function most insidiously precisely when they remain invisible. "Workshop" designates one class among others in the curriculum, but it also names the ongoing operation of class itself.

Like the plowman's turning at field's edge, then, this project turns back to previously untended historical terrain in order to cultivate what scholars of creative writing have left fallow. "Now the farmer turns / the plow the other way," Virgil writes in the *Georgics*, "and once again / he works the land and gives order / to the fields."[86] This project is an attempt at such order.

[84] Alain de Botton, *The Pleasure and Sorrows of Work* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009), 35.
[85] Constance Coiner, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4-5.
[86] Virgil, *Georgics*, trans. Kristina Chew (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), 10.

Chapter One

The Play's a Thing: The 47 Workshop and the Crafting of Creative Writing

In a letter of September 1, 1912, dramatist and theater professor George Pierce Baker recommended the term "workshop" for an experimental course in playwriting he had been planning with former students at Harvard and Radcliffe, the first time that term, now ubiquitous, was used in the context of creative writing pedagogy. "What better place than this," Baker wrote Elizabeth McFadden from the Coole Park home of Lady Gregory, "from which to write you of *The Workshop*, for that is what it seems to me we could call our experiment! 'Experimental Theatre' seems to me too grand."[1]

Baker's letter possesses the force of spontaneity, an almost spiritual conveyance from the aging baronial manor at Coole, its author alighting upon "workshop" as if moved by some occult Celtic numen. In fact, his adoption of the term represented the culmination of months of intensive labor, Baker having scoured the Continent that summer researching the "new stagecraft" then sweeping European theaters. In Moscow, Baker had seen designer Mariano Fortuny's revolutionary lighting apparatus. In London, he documented the use of mechanical devices to subdivide the cramped English stage. Sketching these technologies and others—an expanding proscenium arch, a revolving stage—at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Baker added a simple note in his looping, nearly illegible scrawl: "adapt."[2] And Baker, true to his word, would incorporate much of this stagecraft in the workshop he and his students envisioned, an innovative, technologically advanced dramatic practice the sophistication of which was belied, perhaps, in the nostalgic tone he adopted for McFadden. "As I write, a soft Irish rain silts down outside," Baker wrote. "[I]n this high room lined with books,

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[1] Quoted in Wisney Payne Kinne, *George Pierce Baker and the American Theatre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 166.
[2] Kinne, *George Pierce Baker*, 164.

Mr. Yeats is answering his mail. […] Lady Gregory has been playing with her grandson, who in his jersey suit of Irish green looks like a gnome. I go on toward Belfast and the Ulster players tomorrow."[3] On such a note—imbued with the elegiac calm of the Twilight—Baker sounded the birth of a new and revolutionary pedagogy, to be called "workshop," that would dramatically alter the theory and practice of literary composition.

Baker's goals for his own workshop were comparatively modest—namely, to "try out" the plays of Harvard and Radcliffe undergraduates, crafting them into stage productions and "workshopping" those productions for critical audiences.[4] Central to this vision was the concern, shared by Baker and his students alike, that workshop plays distinguish themselves from the "sordid commercial tone" of Broadway, a concern registered clearly in McFadden's appeal to what in the following pages I will call "craft rhetoric."[5] In contrast to the formulaic productions of Broadway, the workshopped drama would be a labor of love, fulfilling as an end in itself but fastidiously technical, too, in its integration of turn-of-the-century stagecraft. "Equipping […] students with the power to work happily," McFadden wrote from the Hotel Charlesgate in Boston, "and inspiring them with high ideals for their work seems to me to be a greater 'result' than enabling them to put money in their pockets and to drink of the heady wine of Broadway." In her own workshop-by-mail with Baker, McFadden noted likewise that her mentor's encouragement had "changed the work itself from a drudgery" to a "keen delight in accomplishment […] worth while to me from the sheer pleasure of the doing."[6] McFadden's craft rhetoric, prominent throughout her decade-long correspondence with Baker, was hardly incidental. The theatrical intervention both she and Baker anticipated necessitated an approach to theater as a total art, a form in which playwright, producer, scenic artist,

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[3] Quoted in Kinne, *George Pierce Baker*, 167.

[4] George Pierce Baker, "The 47 Workshop," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech Education* V, no. 3 (May 1919): 185.

[5] Elizabeth McFadden to George Pierce Baker, January 31, 1910, George Pierce Baker Papers, Box 22, Item 1809: NP, Harvard University Library.

[6] Ibid., NP.

electrician, and stage mechanic might "labor until the stage is fitted to represent life as the author sees it."[7] Only, Baker believed, through the "total development of the drama as a form"—the "well-crafted drama," I will call it—would American audiences learn to appreciate more than Broadway spectacle and cabaret excess.[8] Baker's workshop would thus serve a pedagogical function not only for its members, but, as they envisioned it, for a wider theater-going public whose taste it endeavored to elevate; indeed, by mid-century the well-crafted realist drama would be a dominant mode, one first forged in the experimental crucible that came to be known—after Baker's Harvard course of the same number—as the "47 Workshop."

Like the more famous workshop that succeeded it in Iowa City, key to the influence of the 47 Workshop was the dissemination of its ideals by Workshop acolytes, many of whom went on to found a range of experimental "little theaters" across the country, among them Eugene O'Neill's Provincetown Players and Agnes Morgan's Neighborhood Playhouse on the Lower East Side.[9] In this chapter, I examine one of those endeavors, the New Playwrights Theater founded by Baker student John Dos Passos. In doing so, I delineate an arc that extends from the American Arts and Crafts movement—of which the 47 Workshop, with its privileging of the well-crafted drama, was a part—through a more radical literary leftism committed, in Dos Passos's case, not so much to pre-industrial forms of labor as to a view of the "writer as technician" within an evolving industrial-corporate regime. Reading plays from both writers as self-reflexive treatments of their compositional setting, I suggest that despite differences in their ultimate objectives Baker and Dos Passos turned to a craft lexicon for similar reasons. In the first place, both found in *craft* a set of values by which to reposition American literature within its institutional context, whether, for Baker,

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[7] George Pierce Baker, *Dramatic Technique* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1947), 15.

[8] George Pierce Baker, "The theater during this century" (unpublished lecture notes) [ca. 1915], George Pierce Baker Papers, Box 56, Item 3855: 4, Harvard University Library.

[9] See Jordan Y. Miller and Winifred L. Frazer, *American Drama Between the Wars: A Critical History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 1-25.

the immediate milieu of Harvard University or, for both writers, the wider context of Broadway theater. In the second place, both Baker and Dos Passos recognized the craft production of literature as a way to rethink the meaning and ramifications of labor writ large: while Baker's opposition to industrialism stopped short of his student's early radicalism, Baker too pointedly and repeatedly challenged the priorities of industrialization, warning in a 1930 pageant written for the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME) against the surrender of pre-industrial values. In other words, as labor—in the form of craft rhetoric—entered institutions of higher education, "workshop" itself became a laboring force in American culture.[10]

One critical tenet of this chapter, then, holds that the earliest creative writing "workshop," so called, constituted the site of a meaningful struggle to produce a non-commercial culture steeped in Arts and Crafts values; though neither Baker nor the 47 Workshop harbored revolutionary ambitions, we might understand both as equipping cultural workers with the tools for deconstructing regnant cultural formations, in particular by rivaling the sentimental and often shoddily produced "mass" theater. This chapter challenges, therefore, interpretations of American antimodernism that view early twentieth-century craftsmanship as a means of easing workers into new rationalized modes of labor. In T. J. Jackson Lears's influential reading, for example, craft revivalists "promised not social transformation but therapeutic self-renewal within a corporate structure of degraded work and bureaucratic 'rationality.'"[11] Baker, I argue, promised something else entirely, mobilizing craft rhetoric in the service of a genuinely oppositional, if not revolutionary, artistic movement; *pace* Lears, I offer that not all forms of non-radical antimodernism represented "accommodation," a with-us-or-against-us mentality that too easily abandons the vast middle

[10] My discussion of workshop as a "laboring force in American culture" echoes Laura Rigal's contention that American labor emerged as "the artifact of myriad representational structures," what she calls "the cultural production of production." See Laura Rigal, *The American Manufactory: Art, Labor, and the World of things in the Early Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 8-25.

[11] T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 69.

ground on which the majority of cultural formations play out.

A second and more substantial tenet of the chapter is its claim for a distinct genealogy of the discipline of "creative writing," a history that begins, in fact, in a genre since expelled from standard creative writing curricula—the drama. In tracing how Dos Passos's leftist stagecraft evolves from the Arts and Crafts impetus of the 47 Workshop, I question in particular Mark McGurl's contention that creative writing begins in the classrooms of progressive education. McGurl's curious statement that the term "workshop" seems "odd when […] used to describe George Pierce Baker's playwriting classes at pompous old Harvard," is somewhat misleading, the result of a selective history that reads forward into mid-century creative writing programs an aesthetic and institutional complexity that predates them.[12] Neither neutral nor arbitrary, "workshop" coordinated a network of conflicting values, signaling, as it did so, the affiliations of creative writing with an American Arts and Crafts movement to which—in its instantiation as the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston (SACB)—Baker had material and ideological ties. As I demonstrate throughout this project, that movement would play a major role in the conception and institutionalization of creative writing, including in Baker's own creative writing pedagogy.

Most significantly, the 47 Workshop adapted what I term an American Arts and Crafts "craft ideal" which reconciled the craftsman's expressive labor with the kind of technical standards enforced by pre-industrial guilds; such standards, as craft ideologues promoted them, worked to discipline or temper the craftsman's self-expressive impulse. As SACB journal *Handicraft* described it, craft was rooted in "thorough technical training [and] a just appreciation of standards" yet carried out by "an intelligent man, whose ability is used as a whole, and not subdivided for commercial purposes."[13] For Baker, the literary self-expression of the playwright was tempered by the

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[12] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 149.

[13] Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston, *Handicraft* 1, no. 1 (April 1902): NP.

workshop's collective stagecraft, as "work committees" for scenery painting and stage lighting, for instance, ensured the maintenance of rigorous technical standards—on these committees, the playwright himself became merely one worker among others. "When [the playwright] has assisted in lighting," Baker believed, "he will be less likely to ask the light man to provide the atmosphere and the subtler gradations of feeling which it is his business to provide by his text."[14] Balancing self-expression and technical rigor—and undoing the division between mental and manual labor—the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal provided a way, in turn, for craftsmen to reconcile the conflicting values of beauty and utility, fostering within an industrial-corporate regime "the love of good and beautiful work as applied to useful service."[15] For Baker, likewise, "workshop" supplied the rhetorical cover necessary to slot aesthetic production into Harvard's increasingly utilitarian elective system; in doing so, Baker hoped to transform a mass American theater industry in which commercial considerations had long entailed the de-privileging of aesthetic standards.

Baker himself was well-connected within that industry. The "father of modern American playwrights," as his obituaries called him, Baker remained throughout his life a close associate of New York theater managers who looked to him for the material techniques and ideological framework—and, of course, the writers—of a new mode of dramatic realism.[16] This chapter documents that work.

I. The 47 Workshop

"Pulchritudo cum Utilitate": Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston

Throughout what craft historians refer to as the "Craftsman" period of the 1890s, the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston remained the largest and most active organization in a rapidly expanding

[14] Baker, "The 47 Workshop," 194.
[15] Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston, *Handicraft* 1, no. 1 (April 1902): NP.
[16] Quoted in Kinne, *George Pierce Baker*, 1.

American Arts and Crafts movement.[17] A leader in craftsmanship since the Colonial era, Boston was fertile ground for the movement, its adherents drawn from a closely-knit network of educators, architects, artists, and idlers that comprised the city's cultural elite. Interlinked by marriage and board memberships, these "craftsmen"—among them Astors, Longfellows, Coolidges, Searses, and Warrens—sought further to parlay their families' economic prosperity into cultural capital, defining standards of "beauty" and "utility" and enforcing those standards through a variety of institutional endeavors.[18] This was a Brahmin class, one with strong ties to Harvard University. Among the Harvard faculty affiliated with SACB were Herbert Langford Warren, dean of the School of Architecture; Denman Waldo Ross, a lecturer on design theory; and Professor of Fine Arts Charles Eliot Norton, first president of SACB and close friend of John Ruskin over the last decade of the nineteenth century. Baker's strongest link with SACB, however, was "Craftsman member" Henry Hunt Clark, a professor at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts School and an expert in staging and set design for the 47 Workshop. It is likely Clark who convinced Baker to seek financing for a theater building among SACB's well-heeled elite. "They have given us our Art Museum," Baker wrote of this group. "Is there no one who by his skill as a leader and organizer […] will establish a theater?"[19]

Heterogeneous in ethos and ambition, SACB endorsed multiple craft initiatives, from manual training programs integrating aesthetic and vocational education to an experimental "Handicraft Shop" near Boston Common, where, as in medieval workshops, craftsmen working collaboratively could benefit from one another's technical expertise in lacemaking, silverwork, and other craft

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[17] For further overview of the American Arts and Crafts movement, see, among other texts noted below, Robert Judson Clark, ed., *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1876-1916* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

[18] For detailed discussion of the history of the American Arts and Crafts movement in Boston, see Janet Koplos and Bruce Metcalf, *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019). For more on SACB as an exercise in cultural capital, see especially Edward S. Cooke, Jr., "Talking or Working: The Conundrum of Moral Aesthetics in Boston's Arts and Crafts Movement," in *Inspiring Reform: Boston's Arts and Craft Movement*, ed. Marilee Boyd Meyer (Wellesley: Davis Museum and Cultural Center, 1997).

[19] Quoted in Kinne, *George Pierce Baker*, 86.

practices.[20] SACB also attempted a quasi-transcendentalist community designed to broaden "the intelligence of both the farmer who becomes a craftsman and the craftsman who turns in part farmer." "We would be much interested," a 1910 editorial in *Handicraft* implores, "to learn of any instances of the actual working out of this plan."[21] As the tone here suggests, a number of these schemes eventually—or immediately—failed, a fact which has led many critics to read American Arts and Crafts generally as a dead-end venture, unable to develop a "truly oppositional culture,"[22] coopted by corporate interests and "packaged […] into a consumer proposition,"[23] and contributing, where it did come to institutional fruition, to a stratified education system with "different subjects for different classes" of citizen.[24] "What began as a critique of art and labor under industrial capitalism," Eileen Boris contends, "turned into a style of art, leisure activities, and personal and social therapy."[25] Common among these postmortems—which are not entirely inaccurate—is a tendency to think of institutions like SACB in terms of their opposition *to* and accommodation *of* an evolving industrial-corporate regime, a framework first proposed by T. J. Jackson Lears in his influential account of turn-of-the-century antimodernism. For Lears, as I have suggested, the American Arts and Crafts movement represented an "accommodationist" platform designed to "fit individuals into […] bureaucratic hierarch[ies]" by providing a therapeutic outlet for creativity and autonomy; craft ideologues drew back, therefore, from "fundamental social change" or the imaging of a "truly alternative culture."[26] In what follows, I demonstrate that such crisp binaries are the

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[20] See Denman Ross, "The Arts and Crafts: A Diagnosis," *Handicraft* 1, no. 10 (January 1903): 229-243. For more on SACB's "Handicraft Shop" see Beverly K. Brandt, *The Craftsman and the Critic: Defining Usefulness and Beauty in Arts and Crafts-Era Boston* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 126-128.

[21] Society of Arts and Crafts, *Handicraft* 3, no. 1 (April 1910), 34-35.

[22] Eileen Boris, "'Dreams of Brotherhood and Beauty': The Social Ideas of the Arts and Crafts Movement," in '*The Art that is Life': The Arts & Crafts Movement in America, 1875-1920*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 1987), 209.

[23] Leslie Greene Bowman, *American Arts and Crafts: Virtue in Design* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1994), 3.

[24] Cooke, "Talking or Working," 24.

[25] Boris, "Dreams of Brotherhood and Beauty," 209.

[26] See especially Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 59-96.

terms of fairy tale, a hindsight moralism that ignores how "opposition" and "accommodation" exist—almost always, and certainly in the case of SACB—as mutually constitutive processes.

For among the lasting contributions of the American Arts and Crafts movement—and there were many—was its maintenance of a craft ideal that held self-expressive craftsmanship to rigorously technical standards. Such an ideal sought to integrate, in other words, what Thorstein Veblen called the "instinct for idle curiosity" with the "instinct of workmanship," the latter a "proclivity for taking pains" that served to discipline the artist's expressive impulse.[27] First president Arthur A. Carey articulated this craft ideal in an address to SACB members in November of 1901. While encouraging craftsmen to "execute designs of their own" and to cultivate "imaginative pleasure" in their work, Carey at the same time sought "to counteract the popular impatience of law and form and the desire for over-ornamentation and specious originality." SACB, Carey maintained, should "insist upon the necessity of sobriety and restraint, of ordered arrangement, of due regard for the relation between the form of an object and its use."[28] This synthesis of self-expression and technical rigor is further suggested in SACB procedures for evaluating—in juried exhibitions, live demonstrations, and gallery shows—the adherence of craft objects to standards of beauty and utility. While judges attended meticulously to basic design elements—shape, line, color, balance, scale, and intensity among them—they also employed linguistic metaphors as a way of assessing a work's "expression," prizing unstudied or "vernacular" work, as one nineteenth-century critic put it, over objects viewed as "affected," "pretentious," or "strained," all terms original to SACB judges.[29] Effective craft, Lewis Day wrote, entailed "the translation of natural […] form, not merely into the language of art, but into the dialect of some particular handicraft. We detect in it the homely accent

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[27] For elaboration of Veblen's "instinct of workmanship" and the "instinct for idle curiosity," see especially Thorstein Veblen, *The Instinct of Workmanship* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), 1-38 and *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 39-43.

[28] Arthur A. Carey, "The Past year and Its Lessons," *Handicraft* 1, no. 1 (April, 1902), 4, 9.

[29] For further examination of SACB aesthetic standards, including the role of art critics in defining standards of beauty and utility, see especially Brandt, *The Craftsman*, 47-54.

of sincere workmanship." In detecting this accent, SACB judges insisted that all exhibition productions carry the name of their maker, often inquiring as to how craftsmen conceptualized their products and what they sought to express in them.[30] It was this craft ideal, I contend, that Baker translated into the operation and objectives of the 47 Workshop, where the expression of the playwright was shaped and channeled by workshop critics who doubled as stagehands, set managers, and costume makers. Just as workers in the SACB Handicraft Shop worked collaboratively on the chasing of silver tea services, 47 Workshop members labored over proper lighting techniques—frosted or bare bulbs, spot or floor angling—and how most effectively to "block" actors with respect to their illumination.[31]

Equally integral to Baker's pedagogy—if less immediately so to those workshops succeeding his—was the reconciliation, in SACB terms, of "Beauty with Usefulness," specifically his own effort to adjust aesthetic production to the imperatives of an increasingly utilitarian or professionalizing system of higher education. More than simply a "Boston society shibboleth," as Lears holds, the reconciliation of beauty and utility constituted SACB's most prominent form of "opposition" to industrialization, its standards disseminated nationwide as part of the organization's work to elevate public taste in Boston and beyond.[32] Contemporary critics—addressing the way craft objects functioned, the materials they were made from, and the manner of their construction—viewed their mission as itself a pedagogical gambit, laying a foundation for economic reorganization by re-educating the American public. These critics utilized an array of national journals like *Handicraft* and Gustav Stickley's *The Craftsman*, as well as public workshops and outreach programs, to teach consumers to demand greater refinement from the products they purchased, advocating a product's hand-crafted beauty—as well as its price—as indication of its utility. And while that term, "utility,"

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30 See Brandt, *The Craftsman*, 49.
31 See George Pierce Baker, Untitled lighting plan (unpublished) [ca. 1915], George Pierce Baker Papers, Box 48, Item 3647: NP, Harvard University Library.
32 Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 77.

had accrued a wide variety of meanings by the late nineteenth century—from designating anything with beneficial consequences to connoting short- and long-term commercial success—craft adherents also repurposed the word to include the production of objects and the maintenance of a lifestyle that were salutary for those who engaged with them. Among its other accomplishments, this is to say, American Arts and Crafts wrested "utility" from its commercial and industrial connotations. The official seal of SACB testifies to its anti-industrial impetus, the phrase "Pulchritudo cum Utilitate" forged in Gothic letters below a designer's calipers, a claw hammer, an architect's pen, and an artist's brushes and palette—here, in miniature, was Baker's stagecraft, a unity of the expressive arts held to rigorous technical standards.

The American Arts and Crafts movement, to be sure, was animated by nostalgic ideology, one never "fully linked to a Progressive politics in America," as Wendy Kaplan diagnoses.[33] But its effort to integrate expression and technique into a craft ideal—as well as its serious commitment to the reconciliation of beauty and utility—constituted meaningful, if momentary and non-radical, "opposition" to the degraded quality of life under an industrial-corporate regime. Such a movement paved the way, moreover, for more politically-oriented modernisms of the 1920s and 30s—including Dos Passos's literary leftism and the experimentation of Black Mountain College, both taken up in this dissertation—and defined clear and consequential parameters of aesthetic production for the institutions within which those modernisms were crafted.[34] Baker's 47 Workshop was one such institution, its invocation of that term, "workshop," signaling its affiliation with Arts and Crafts ideology while simultaneously providing the rhetorical cover with which, at Harvard, to legitimate the study and production of the drama. Like aircraft leaving a hub, the legacy of the American Arts

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[33] Wendy Kaplan, "The Lamp of British Precedent: An Introduction to the Arts and Crafts Movement," in *'The Art that is Life': The Arts & Crafts Movement in America, 1875-1920*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 1987), 59.

[34] For further discussion of the effects of the American Arts and Crafts movement on later modernisms, see especially Kaplan, "The Lamp," 59.

and Crafts movement delineated multiple trajectories across the skyscape of the twentieth century, few of which may be immediately mappable as "oppositional" craft initiatives.

"Pompous old Harvard"

"Whatever new courses in the drama you may teach, George, it is for your work in argumentation that Harvard pays you."[35]

So, reportedly, spoke Harvard president Charles W. Eliot to Baker in 1900, when the latter had first introduced a course in contemporary drama that would become, twelve years later, the 47 Workshop. Eliot's statement indicates unequivocally the values of the university he sought to transform, prizing as he did the work in logic, rhetoric, and argumentation that had made Baker a guru-figure of sorts among turn-of-the-century businessmen. Baker's *Principles of Argumentation*, for example—a handbook of persuasion devoured by the nation's corporate elite—had single-handedly won Baker promotion to assistant professor in 1895. Though Baker was married to Eliot's niece—the wedding held at Eliot's vacation home on Mount Desert—the two would maintain an uneasy alliance throughout their time at Harvard, Baker perpetually weathering his superior's efforts to divert his dramatic investments along more profitable lines. Eliot's comments are indicative, too, of the difficulty Baker would face in adapting a course in dramatic production—"English 47" and its attached "Workshop"—to Harvard's utilitarian elective system; as Baker keenly perceived, such a system significantly imperiled the role of the arts in higher education.

In employing craft rhetoric as what I have called "rhetorical cover," Baker was responding to a broader utilitarian movement that had been gaining influence in American education since the end of the Civil War. "Almost every visible change" during this period, writes Laurence Veysey, "lay in

[35] Quoted in Kinne, *George Pierce Baker*, 102.

the direction of concessions to the utilitarian type of demand for reform."[36] The elective system was only the most iconic—and controversial—of these concessions, which included at Harvard the creation of an official graduate school, expansion of the faculty in newer, more "professional" disciplines, and subdivision of the responsibilities of the president into dozens of specialized offices, precursor to the byzantine administrations of our own era. In theory, of course—and as its reputation leads one to believe—the elective system constituted a liberalizing force in higher education, empowering students with greater agency over their learning and loosening the grip of so-called "classical" pedagogy. Indeed, by the time Eliot's reforms were implemented fully in 1899, the sole mandatory requirements at Harvard consisted of freshman English and a course in either French or German which, in the administrative jargon of the era, could be "anticipated" at the preparatory level.[37] That we imagine, however, that such changes led to the flourishing of ceramics courses—or to doe-eyed bohemians reading Rousseau or conservatories of aspiring Schoenbergs—testifies to how shrewdly Eliot peddled the elective system as fostering "the natural bent and peculiar quality of every boy's mind," trumpeting "the happiness of the individual" as "sacredly regarded in his education."[38] Nominally promoting individual freedom, in practice the elective system subordinated that freedom to the needs of an industrializing nation, de-emphasizing a "well-rounded" education—a phrase Eliot loathed—in favor of professionalization. "In his freedom," writes Veysey, "the student was supposed to become a trained expert in some special field," with emphasis given to newer disciplines in engineering and the applied sciences.[39] Eliot himself was fond of metaphorizing these transformations. "To reason about the average human mind as if it were a globe, to be expanded symmetrically from a center outward, is to be betrayed by a

[36] Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 60.
[37] For the effects of Harvard's elective system on secondary education, see Hugh Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America: The Educational Leadership of Charles W. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 95-96.
[38] Charles W. Eliot, "Eliot on the Scientific Schools," in *American Higher Education: A Documentary History, Volume II*, ed. Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 638.
[39] Veysey, *Emergence*, 67.

metaphor," he wrote in 1869, the year of his inauguration. "A cutting-tool, a drill, or auger would be a juster symbol of the mind."[40] The imagery is telling of the ultimate values behind what Eliot called "the new education." Geared toward professional specialization rather than humanist breadth, such a pedagogy was intended to produce those well-trained "experts" on whom, according to social efficiency adepts like Veblen, an evolving industrial regime would depend. Industrialization, Veblen wrote, inherently "lends itself to systematic control under the direction of industrial experts, skilled technologists, who may be called 'production engineers,' for want of a better term."[41] Time and again, Eliot's comments betray his subordination of liberal to "engineering" imperatives. "[T]o make a good engineer, chemist, or architect," he wrote, "the only sure way is to make first […] an observant, reflecting, and sensible man, whose mind is not only well-stored, but well-trained also to see, compare, reason, and decide."[42] Even the practice of creative writing at Harvard, an occasional pursuit in advanced composition courses, prioritized professional forms like the newspaper article, the magazine feature, and the technical memo.[43] In his inaugural address, Eliot waxed poetic about the potential of this new education, declaring that "when millions are to be fed […] the single fish-line must be replaced by seines and trawls, the human shoulders by steam-elevators."[44] One professor at New York University put it even more succinctly—"[t]he college has ceased to be a cloister and has become a workshop."[45]

Baker felt sharply the deleterious effects of this utilitarian impetus. As I have suggested, he rightly perceived that his work in the drama was considered, as Eliot put it, "second best" in

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[40] Charles W. Eliot, "The New Education," *The Atlantic Monthly* XXIII (February 1869): 218.

[41] Thorstein Veblen, *The Engineers and the Price System* (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1921), 52.

[42] Eliot, "Scientific Schools," 638. See also the comments of Eliot's biographer, Henry James, on the elective system in Henry James, *Charles W. Eliot* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1930), 347.

[43] See Katherine H. Adams, *A History of Professional Writing Instruction in American Colleges* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1993), 61-62.

[44] Charles W. Eliot, "Inaugural Address as President of Harvard, 1869," in *American Higher Education: A Documentary History, Volume II*, ed. Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 603.

[45] Quoted in Veysey, *Emergence*, 61.

comparison with more profitable endeavors, and his 1905 proposal for a course in dramatic technique—to be called "English 47"—was initially rejected by one faculty member as an "absurd interpretation of the elective idea."[46] Only when Baker rebranded the course as a response to growing demand for professional training in the drama—and only when he'd adopted the craft rhetoric implicit in "workshop"—was his proposal finally accepted; his pedagogy was not, as Baker once again stressed, the avant garde insurrection of "experimental theater," but serious labor in the useful and remunerative discipline of stagecraft. Due to lecture at the Sorbonne the following year, Baker would offer "English 47: The Technique of the Drama" for the first time in 1908-1909, the year of Eliot's retirement. While his decades-long pursuit of a theater building would never prove successful, Baker found greater encouragement for his dramatic work under Eliot's successor, A. Lawrence Lowell. Rolling back many of Eliot's more utilitarian reforms, Lowell declared at his own inauguration that "the college ought to produce not defective specialists, but men intellectual and well-rounded, of wide sympathies and unfettered judgment."[47] Eliot, no doubt, was appalled.

While a scholar like Gerald Graff argues, then, that the turn-of-the-century conflict between liberal and utilitarian education—between beauty and utility, we might say—failed to find "visible institutional expression," that conflict was expressed in many forms, among them a craft rhetoric and practice, called "workshop," which mediated between aesthetic production and the utilitarian impetus of the new education.[48] The discipline of creative writing thus begins not with a progressive emphasis on self-expression but—at "pompous old Harvard" in 1912—with an American Arts and Crafts movement committed to craft as a means of reconciling "Beauty with Usefulness." The

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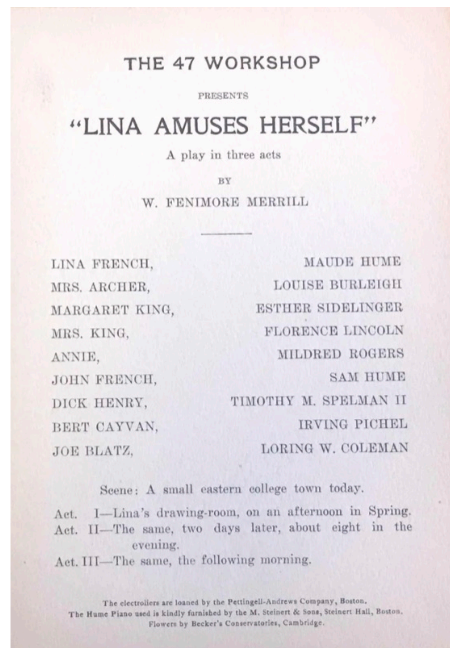
[46] Charles W. Eliot, "The Changes Needed in American Secondary Education," in *A Late Harvest* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1924), 107. Quoted in Kinne, *George Pierce Baker*, 102.
[47] Lawrence A. Lowell, "Inaugural Address of the President of Harvard University," *Science* 30, no. 772 (October 15, 1909): 499.
[48] For an otherwise probing account of the history of literary education, see Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

origins of any discipline, no doubt, are a kind of *ignis fatuus*, constantly receding before our efforts to pin them down—but the "programmatic self-expression" that McGurl first locates in mid-century graduate institutions begins under an earlier, entirely different program.

The play's a thing: The 47 Workshop

On the evening of Thursday, January 23, 1913, the 47 Workshop staged its first production at Agassiz House, Radcliffe College, an otherwise unremarkable three-act play written and produced by W. Fennimore Merrill, another of Baker's former students. Titled *Lina Amuses Herself* [*figs*. 1.1 and 1.2], the play was rudimentary in comparison with later workshop productions, its single largest expenses running to $14.00 for flowers, $8.36 for construction of the stage, and $3.28 for unspecified "damages from flashlight."[49]



THE 47 WORKSHOP

PRESENTS

"LINA AMUSES HERSELF"

A play in three acts

BY

W. FENIMORE MERRILL

LINA FRENCH,	MAUDE HUME
MRS. ARCHER,	LOUISE BURLEIGH
MARGARET KING,	ESTHER SIDELINGER
MRS. KING,	FLORENCE LINCOLN
ANNIE,	MILDRED ROGERS
JOHN FRENCH,	SAM HUME
DICK HENRY,	TIMOTHY M. SPELMAN II
BERT CAYVAN,	IRVING PICHEL
JOE BLATZ,	LORING W. COLEMAN

Scene: A small eastern college town today.

Act. I—Lina's drawing-room, on an afternoon in Spring.
Act. II—The same, two days later, about eight in the evening.
Act. III—The same, the following morning.

The electroliers are loaned by the Pettingell-Andrews Company, Boston.
The Hume Piano used is kindly furnished by the M. Steinert & Sons, Steinert Hall, Boston.
Flowers by Becker's Conservatories, Cambridge.

[*fig*. 1.1] Opening day program for *Lina Amuses Herself*, the first production of the 47 Workshop, January 23, 1913.

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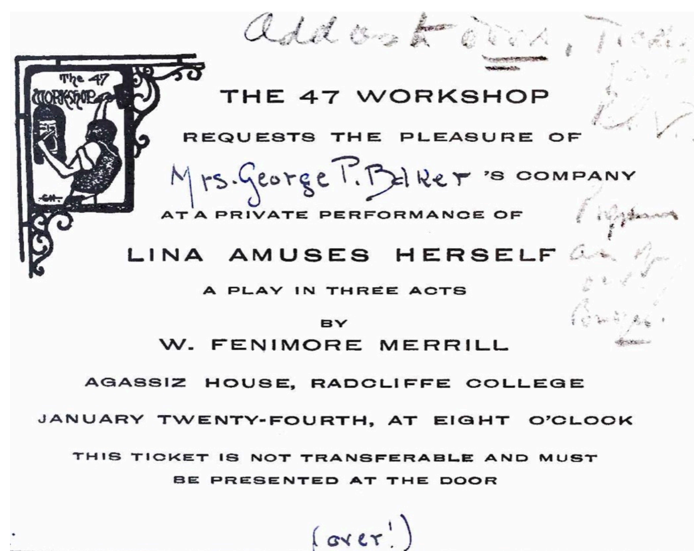
[49] "Account of expenses of *Lina Amuses Herself*," George Pierce Baker Papers, Box 48, Item 3635: NP, Harvard University Library.


THE 47 WORKSHOP
REQUESTS THE PLEASURE OF
Mrs. George P. Baker'S COMPANY
AT A PRIVATE PERFORMANCE OF
LINA AMUSES HERSELF
A PLAY IN THREE ACTS
BY
W. FENIMORE MERRILL
AGASSIZ HOUSE, RADCLIFFE COLLEGE
JANUARY TWENTY-FOURTH, AT EIGHT O'CLOCK
THIS TICKET IS NOT TRANSFERABLE AND MUST
BE PRESENTED AT THE DOOR
(over!)

[*fig.* 1.2] Invitation to *Lina Amuses Herself* for Mrs. George P. Baker.

Despite its humble beginning—or owing, perhaps, to its necessary thrift—the 47 Workshop would dramatically reshape American theater in the decades to come, providing a crucible within which the realist, psychologically insightful drama would first be forged. Indeed, when the 47 Workshop closed shop in 1924, a "literary awakening" had taken root among American audiences akin, according to Wisney Payne Kinne, to the nineteenth-century development of the novel.[50] Other critics, too, have understood the revolution in American drama with reference to nineteenth-century fiction, noting that the emphasis on characterization in Henry James, for instance, contributed to the illumination of psychology and social forces under dramatic realism. Characters in the drama, summarizes Gerald Berkowitz, "were affected by the world they inhabited."[51] If the idea seems basic, fundamental to American drama as a whole, its obviousness is testament to how successful Baker's effort was to elevate public taste through education, a mission he shared with American Arts and Crafts initiatives like SACB. By the time Baker decamped for Yale in the fall of 1926, the 47 Workshop had become a household name, lauded in venues as diverse as *Science*, the

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[50] Kinne, *George Pierce Baker*, 67.
[51] Gerald M. Berkowitz, *American Drama of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Longman, 1992), 11.

Saturday Evening Post, and *New Masses*—the Workshop had done its work.

Just as it reconciled aesthetic production to utilitarian education, that is, the 47 Workshop mediated between Harvard playwrights and a American entertainment industry that had long privileged commercial success over aesthetic integrity. Major blockbusters from the 1910s, for example, included George M. Cohan's patriotic wartime spectacle *Over There* (1917)—source of the hit "You're a Grand Old Flag"—and Irving Berlin's *Watch Your Step* (1914), the latter adapting Verdi into syncopated dance-tunes. As these works suggest, Broadway plays from this period tended toward melodrama, light sentimentalism packaged in familiar, economically safe formulas. Built too to facilitate the early twentieth-century "star system," Broadway drama reinforced the era's belief in upward mobility, an escapism cultivated in a dazzling array of nickelodeons, chorus lines, folies, and cabaret shows at venues like Rector's and Murray's Roman Gardens.[52] Moreover, the theater faced serious—if no more refined—competition from a booming film industry offering American consumers cheaper and more accessible mass entertainment. Baker opposed these modes, but he did not ignore them. What Baker valued in such fare, rather, was its ability to "amuse and entertain," what he called—in a slightly different sense than I have used the term—its "utilitarian" function. In unpublished lecture notes, Baker distinguishes between the "utilitarian" and "ethical" functions of the American drama, counterposing to its entertainment value the genre's ability to employ "situation, dialogue, character not as ends in themselves, but as means of inculcating a thesis." For Baker, both functions were integral to successful drama. Only by synthesizing "the technique and the artistic self-respect of the Ethical School," he wrote, with "the understanding of audiences that belongs to the Utilitarian, can lasting and great drama come."[53] Baker's dramaturgy,

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[52] On popular theater during the first decades of the twentieth century, see especially C.W.E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 1-9; Thomas Fahy, *Staging Modern American Life: Popular Culture in the Experimental Theatre of Millay, Cummings, and Dos Passos* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1-15; and Miller and Frazer, *American Drama*, 1-2.
[53] Baker, "The theater…", 7-14.

in other words, functioned as a kind of "stretching device," plying dramatic form until it simply contained and expressed more than conventional drama.[54]

The mode resulting from such stretching was dramatic realism, the psychological depth and social complexity of which necessitated "almost perfect technique" and promoted, therefore, the "total development of the drama as a form."[55] More than mere "truckling" to one's audience (to use Baker's term) or didactic politicizing, dramatic realism entailed a "well-crafted drama" that included attention to scenery, music, stage mechanics, costumes, lighting, writing, directing, and even ushering. While Broadway stages had consisted of either extravagant spectacles or simple backdrops for larger-than-life "stars," the realist stage would assume a defining power in service of what Baker called "the just representation of life."[56] In their excellent history of interbellum American drama, Jordan Miller and Winifred Frazer detail one example of how dramatic realism was facilitated by and necessitated an innovative new stagecraft. They are worth quoting at length in order to demonstrate how crucial a craft like lighting became to the realist mode. "Now," they write, "the stage technician could produce startling realistic illusions.

> [W]hile darkening the auditorium was not unknown with the gas, electric lighting could instantly place the house in total darkness; as a result, the actors abandoned the custom of playing outward to a visible audience and turned inward to each other on the fully illuminated stage. The movement and stance of their characters became more natural, more representational…[57]

Baker knew well the dramatic potential of lighting techniques. When he first wrote McFadden of "*The Workshop*," he had recently completed a tour of European theaters where lighting and electrical innovations had been dazzling audiences for several years. And Baker himself had experimented in the simulation of natural light with Fortuny's revolutionary cyclorama dome; mounted behind the stage, Fortuny's dome gave the illusion of an expansive sky on which the stage artist—by painting a

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[54] For more on theatrical experimentation as a "stretching device" see Berkowitz, *American Drama*, 31.
[55] Baker, *Dramatic Technique*, 7.
[56] Ibid., 15.
[57] Miller and Frazer, *American Drama*, 30.

system of reflective mirrors—could simulate clouds, rainfall, and even eclipses. "We still think too much in terms of candles and gas," Baker wrote in 1925.

> The university theatre should not only train young electricians to lighting as real, as delicate, as suggestive as possible, but should abet them in all desired technical and imaginative experiments. Many an electrician thinks technically in watts and amperes, but not in terms of the imagination. Others riot in imagination, but are not properly based technically. Here, as elsewhere in the theatre, the leap inspired by imagination should be taken from a sure footing in technique.[58]

Yoking inspiration and imagination—terms redolent of self-expression—to the discipline of stage technique, Baker's comments point once more to the affinities of the 47 Workshop with Arts and Craft ideology, a value system that understood craft as the dynamic imbrication of expressive labor and technical standards. If the expressiveness of dramatic realism necessitated a revolutionary stagecraft, it was that stagecraft, Baker implies, that made dramatic realism possible in the first place—on the stage as elsewhere, form had become indissolubly bonded to content.

In its attention to the aesthetic possibilities unique to dramatic form, the 47 Workshop might seem to anticipate what Clement Greenberg, after Gotthold Lessing, would famously term modernist "medium specificity," the idea that "to restore the identity of an art object the opacity of its medium must be emphasized."[59] Somewhat paradoxically, though, Baker found that "the specialization of the time had come even into the drama" most noticeably in the genre's unifying—or omnivorous incorporation—of virtually every *other* art form, its maintenance, as he put it, of "the long-established relationship" among music, dance, poetry, painting, and architecture, as well as among mechanical arts like lighting and sound engineering.[60] This integrative art was not merely a response to the dictates of dramatic realism, however. It was also the practical extension of Baker's courses in the history and technique of the drama, including a course on Shakespeare attending,

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[58] George Pierce Baker, "The Theatre and the University," *Theatre Arts* 9, no. 2 (February 1925): 104.
[59] Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina (New York: Routledge, 2000), 42.
[60] Baker, "The theater during this century," 9-10.

among other things, to Inigo Jones's stage architecture, the Elizabethan printing industry, the geography of London and its environs, curtain technologies, royal patronage, and the psychology of English as opposed to Continental audiences. Key to Shakespeare's mastery of the early modern drama, Baker taught, was his command of cutting-edge stagecraft. The powerful structural irony at the beginning of Act III, Scene 2 in *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance—when Juliet, unaware that Romeo has been banished, declares that she will "cut him out in little stars," so unshakeable is her love—is enhanced by concealing Juliet's bedchamber behind the curtains of the inner stage, immediately opened after Romeo's banishment.[61] As he understood it, Baker's work was to teach theater as a "total art," to guide students in the "total development of the drama as a form" through attention to mass, color, light, and shadow, properties as meaningful as the play text itself. "I would like to know more about lighting," one student wrote Baker, "for I can see that it has *body* as well as spirit and must be reckoned with as *material* the same as any other plot substance."[62]

In this light, Baker's dramaturgy looks less like modernist "medium specificity" than like Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, that "total work of art" in which all other modes found their apotheosis. "The highest conjoint work of art is the *Drama*," Wagner had written in 1849, explaining that drama "can only be at hand in all its *possible* fullness when, in it, each *separate branch of art* is at hand in *its own utmost fullness*."[63] For Wagner, whose work Baker knew and admired, that fullness had only ever existed in the amphitheaters of ancient Greece, where choral, architectural, poetic, and rhythmic artists brought forth together an "ideal expression" that managed, at the same time, to sublimate those arts "according to the momentary need of the only rule- and purpose-giver, the Dramatic

[61] For other readings of the influence of early modern stagecraft on dramatic form, see especially George Pierce Baker, *The Development of Shakespeare as a Dramatist* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1907), 71-96.
[62] Quoted in Kinne, *George Pierce Baker*, 283. [emphasis in original]
[63] Richard Wagner, "The Art-Work of the Future," in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works, Volume I: The Art-Work of the Future*, ed. and trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966), 184. [emphasis in original]

Action."[64] Absent from the world stage since Aeschylus, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* fell victim, Wagner held, to precisely that medium specificity Greenberg would identify, the arts "unlinked from the united chain" until contemporary drama became one more "industrial undertaking" of men "who have yesterday conducted a speculation in grain and tomorrow […] a 'corner' in sugar."[65] There is much of Wagner in Baker's dramaturgy, from the craft-like disciplining of the expressive arts to the barbed objection to degraded contemporary theater to Wagner's mandate that "the *Scene* has firstly to comply with all the conditions of 'space' imposed by the joint dramatic action to be displayed thereon." At the same time, Wagner wrote,

> it has to fulfill those conditions in the sense of bringing this dramatic action to the eye and ear of the spectator in intelligible fashion. In the arrangement of the *space for the spectators*, the need for optic and acoustic understanding of the artwork will give the necessary law, which can only be observed by a union of beauty and fitness in the proportions.[66]

This was Wagner in 1849—but this was also, almost verbatim, the work of the 47 Workshop six decades later, whose stagecraft, employed in the service of the realistic drama, could be said to be "medium specific" only insofar as its "medium" included almost every other.

The organization and operation of the 47 Workshop, accordingly, reflected its commitment to theater as a total art. Indeed, later creative writing craft—with techniques focused on structure, setting, sound, movement, texture, and tone—should be viewed as abstractions of or formal metaphors for material practices first institutionalized in Baker's Workshop. Workshop plays were written, in most cases, by individual playwrights in English 47, itself a workshop-style course dedicated to reading, critiquing, and revising student plays, and which met, Kinne reports, "around a large round table that soon became a symbol of the course"—and of every workshop since.[67] Once

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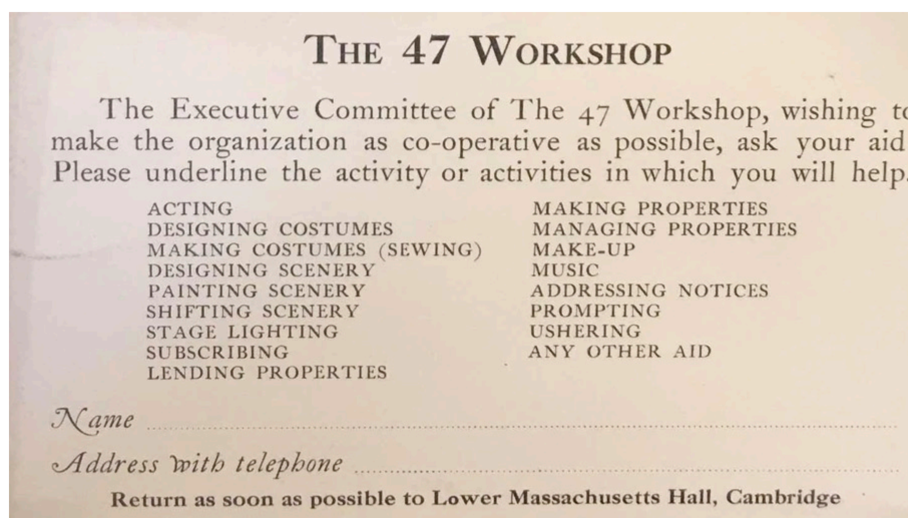
[64] Richard Wagner, "Art and Revolution," in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works, Volume I: The Art-Work of the Future*, ed. and trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966), 33. Wagner, "Art-Work," 191.
[65] Ibid., 95. Wagner, "Art and Revolution," 61.
[66] Wagner, "Art-Work," 185.
[67] Kinne, George Pierce Baker, 90.

Baker selected it for staging, a play would pass to set designers in the 47 Workshop proper, among whom an official competition was held to determine the overall aesthetic of the staged production; as part of this competition, designers were required to submit sketches, models with costumed figurines, and even architectural schematics for lighting and stage backgrounds. Soon after, the play would be distributed to the producer for rehearsals, its schematics to electricians, properties managers, and carpenters "to be made up out of stock," Baker wrote, or—in rare cases when the Workshop's vaults proved wanting—"to be newly built."[68] These groups represented merely a fraction, however, of what the Workshop's constitution called its "Artistic Workers," dozens of students, alumni, Boston citizens, and drama aficionados organized into work committees with assignments ranging from acting and shifting scenery to subscribing, prompting, and make-up [*fig.* 1.3].[69]



THE 47 WORKSHOP

The Executive Committee of The 47 Workshop, wishing to make the organization as co-operative as possible, ask your aid. Please underline the activity or activities in which you will help.

ACTING
DESIGNING COSTUMES
MAKING COSTUMES (SEWING)
DESIGNING SCENERY
PAINTING SCENERY
SHIFTING SCENERY
STAGE LIGHTING
SUBSCRIBING
LENDING PROPERTIES
MAKING PROPERTIES
MANAGING PROPERTIES
MAKE-UP
MUSIC
ADDRESSING NOTICES
PROMPTING
USHERING
ANY OTHER AID

Name ....

Address with telephone ....

Return as soon as possible to Lower Massachusetts Hall, Cambridge

[*fig.* 1.3] The "work committees" of the 47 Workshop

For Baker as for later creative writing pedagogues—both influenced by an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal—the collective technical standards enforced by these committees served as a check on the

[68] "The 47 Workshop Constitution," [1921], George Pierce Baker Papers, Box 50, Item 3855: NP, Harvard University Library.
[69] Ibid., NP.

playwright's expressive ego. "In thinking that any part of the labor that goes to the making of his finished product is beneath him," Baker wrote in another set of lecture notes, "[the playwright] impairs the value of his work. The genuine artist will have learned his craft or crafts as well as his art."[70] A signet that adorned the Workshop's programs symbolized the collaborative nature of these practices—four masked Pierrots representing author, actor, artist, and audience.[71] Such emblems would have been familiar to craft ideologues, who since William Morris had deployed similar logos, crests, and insignia as a way of signaling inclusion in the closed guild of the craft workshop.

For Baker, the "workshopping" of plays for critical audiences was integral to the maintenance of guild-like stagecraft standards, an effort, like SACB's juried exhibitions, to present to the public and to Broadway managers only the most well-crafted of Harvard dramas. Beginning in 1915, archival records include extensive applications for Workshop membership, in particular statements of interest and experience in the drama as well as letters of recommendation embossed with the letterheads of Boston's elite. These applications suggest the popularity of the 47 Workshop within those same circles that constituted the membership of SACB. "I am trying to move heaven and earth to get two tickets to the 47 Workshop play for this week," a Mrs. Walter B. Kahn wrote Baker in 1921, "and I have been told that to achieve this stupendous result you are the only person to turn to." With regrets, Baker declined.[72] For those who passed muster, however, Workshop staffers kept meticulous attendance records, noting the number of complimentary tickets permitted each work committee—and the number actually used—and issuing warnings to audience members with unexcused absences or outstanding critiques. "The Executive Committee respectfully reminds you that membership in the 47 Workshop involves […] a written criticism of every performance

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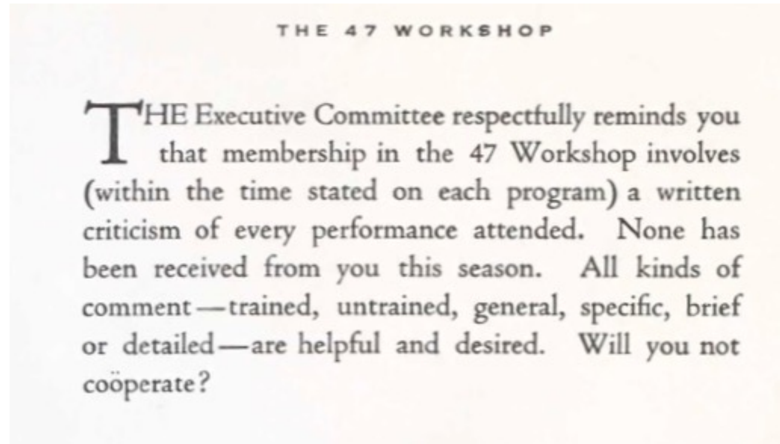
[70] "Interpretation of the play by the scenery," (unpublished lecture notes) [ca. 1915], George Pierce Baker Papers, Box 56, Item 3872: NP, Harvard University Library.

[71] "Program for *Lina Amuses Herself*," [1913], George Pierce Baker Papers, Box 46, Item 3558: NP, Harvard University Library.

[72] Mrs. Walter B. Kahn to George Pierce Baker, undated, George Pierce Baker Papers, Box 50, Item 3674: NP, Harvard University Library.

attended," the standardized admonishment read [*fig.* 1.4]. "None has been received from you this season. […] Will you not cooperate?"[73]


THE 47 WORKSHOP

THE Executive Committee respectfully reminds you that membership in the 47 Workshop involves (within the time stated on each program) a written criticism of every performance attended. None has been received from you this season. All kinds of comment—trained, untrained, general, specific, brief or detailed—are helpful and desired. Will you not coöperate?

[*fig.* 1.4] Standardized note of warning to delinquent members of the 47 Workshop.

When one audience member failed to show, he mailed a handwritten note explaining that he'd suffered a flat tire on the way to the performance. "It is only honest to tell you that I came to the Workshop in a shameful way," he wrote [*fig.* 1.5]. "I am afflicted with a Ford."[74]

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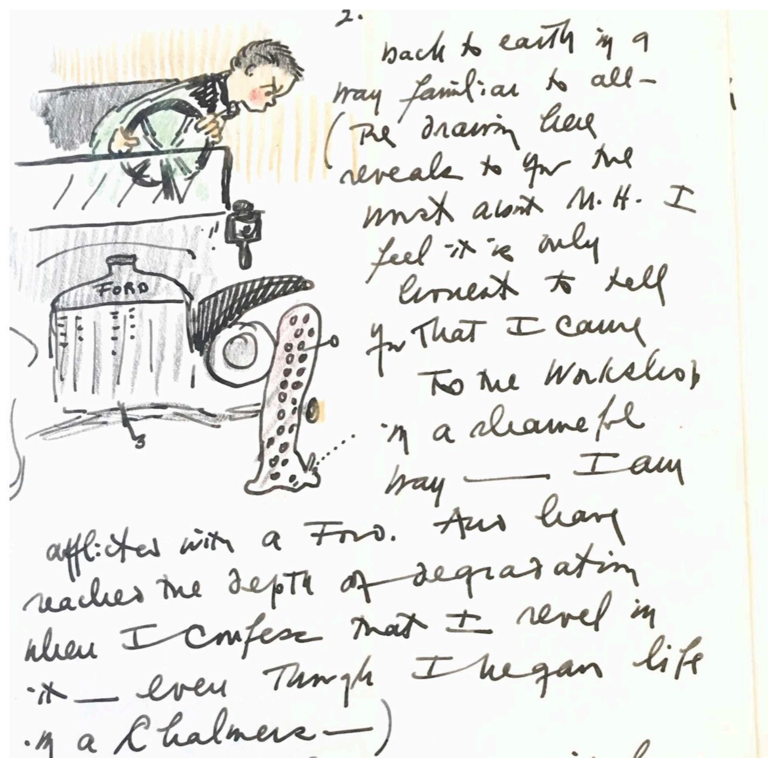
73 "Attendance card," [ca. 1919], George Pierce Baker Papers, Box 49, Item 3663: NP, Harvard University Library.

74 [Illegible] to George Pierce Baker, undated, George Pierce Baker Papers, Box 50, Item 3689: NP, Harvard University Library.


2.
back to earth in a
way familiar to all—
(the drawing here
reveals to you the
worst about M. H. I
feel it is only
honest to tell
you that I came
to the Workshop
in a shameful
way — I am
afflicted with a Ford. And [illegible]
reaches the depth of degradation
when I confess that I revel in
it — even though I began life
in a Chalmers —)

[*fig.* 1.5] "I came to the Workshop in a shameful way—I am afflicted with a Ford."

The exchange nicely allegorizes the way craft production was threatened by an evolving industrial-corporate regime, but it also demonstrates that it was serious work to "workshop" those plays that made it on stage. Audience members were required to hand in written comments—ranging in length from cursory note cards to multiple-page essays and, in tone, from adulatory to withering—within a week of viewing any given play; while these critiques were signed "as a guarantee of good faith," Baker frequently removed the signatures before passing them on to individual playwrights.[75] Workshop audiences adhered, too, to meticulous rules regarding everything from their applause to their wardrobe—"no evening dress," Baker stipulated, no flowers across the footlights—so that even casual observers showed up, we might say, in the costumes of workers.[76] A century before the phrase would take off among early modern materialist scholars, Baker emphasized repeatedly that

[75] Quoted in "Baker of Harvard, Maker of Dramatists," *New York Tribune*, February 13, 1916.
[76] Baker, "The 47 Workshop," 423.

"the play's the thing," and every aspect of the 47 Workshop was oriented toward the optimal crafting of that thing.[77]

Like the proto-industrial workshop to precede it, therefore, and like an American Arts and Crafts movement which hearkened back to it, the 47 Workshop was a transitional institution, adjusting liberal to utilitarian education, mediating between Harvard and Broadway, and, by fusing self-expression with fastidious stagecraft standards, preserving the "craft ideal" within an industrial-corporate economy. Also like its real historical predecessor, the 47 Workshop provided a site within which, as sociologist Richard Sennett describes, "to face or duck issues of authority and autonomy," subordinating the artist's autonomy not to the authority of a master, but to a collective.[78] For Sennett, medieval and pre-industrial craft fostered an "engaged material consciousness," precisely the ethos Baker's dramaturgy cultivated in reminding students, for example, that light contained both spirit and body.[79] These affinities between the 47 Workshop and its namesake are neatly suggested in the insignia printed on Workshop letterhead [*fig.* 1.6].

[*fig.* 1.6] Letterhead of the 47 Workshop.

[77] Ibid., 187.
[78] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 54.
[79] Ibid., 120.

Within the frame of a cast-iron bracket adorned with art nouveau scrollwork, a hooded medieval engraver wields a hammer and chisel. Hammer raised nearly outside the frame, the engraver holds chisel to stone, his torso swollen, bicep flexed. He is—this worker—forever anonymous, dressed in the apron of his labor. He is ready to craft.

II. *Control*

Setting the Stage: Pageantry, Baker, and the ASME

Though dramatic realism had proven the main beneficiary of Baker's new stagecraft, it was the pageant form, more than any other, that captivated Baker as an opportunity to achieve the "total development of the drama as a form," making up in technological sophistication what it lacked, perhaps, in psychological insight.

An effort to revitalize drama as a popular form distinct from commercial entertainment, pageantry had been inspired by the British Arts and Crafts movement under John Ruskin, who in 1882 had called for a revival of the early modern masque as a vehicle for—and formal instantiation of—pre-industrial craftsmanship. In the U.S. pageantry became wildly popular between 1905 and 1925, the genre embodying an antimodern impetus both in its form and mode of construction as well as in its frequent depiction of a halcyon age of craft labor and religious conviction, characteristically realized through scenes of medieval Europe and the colonial United States.[80] Employed not only by antimodernists and artistic innovators but also by civic leaders, social workers, political activists, and educational reformers, pageantry was viewed as a vital form of participatory democracy, one uniquely suited for breaking down barriers of race and class and—like the Abbey Theatre and Bayreuth opera festivals—for the promotion of civic and national identity.

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[80] See David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 4-5.

Like the theorists and practitioners of American Arts and Crafts, moreover, pageant enthusiasts held the genre to rigorous technical standards, organizing the American Pageant Association in 1913 in order to enforce "professional expertise" in the pageant's cutting-edge stagecraft.[81] Baker's own 1921 pageant depicting the Pilgrims' arrival at Plymouth Rock, for example, had featured massive chorus ensembles, a parade of historical floats, and even a reconstructed "Mayflower" in Plymouth Harbor, all lit, according to one reporter, with the "most sensitive and flexible electrical equipment that has ever been used for a dramatic performance out-of-doors." Writing in *The New Republic*, Oliver Sayler raved over the lighting in *The Pilgrim Spirit*, noting that the pageant "saves the intimate scenes from the disaster which usually befalls them by cutting out of the night a small and sharply outlined rectangle of brilliance, for the world and all like a prison cell or a ship's cabin;" the pageant's lighting technician, Sayler went on, "belongs to that rare type, the engineer who is also [an] artist."[82] As a genre, the pageant's total stagecraft—especially evident in Baker's pageantry—facilitated its characteristic integration of myth, fable, pastoral, and history in a kind of social allegory, its technical possibilities making it an important vehicle for a wide variety of early twentieth-century social reforms.

It was the success of *The Pilgrim Spirit*—with crowds overflowing the oceanfront grandstands and 50-cent seats selling for $10 apiece—that drew the attention of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, which approached Baker in early 1929 to write and direct a pageant celebrating the organization's 50th anniversary.[83] Baker's association with the ASME seems strange, perhaps, given his earlier ties with SACB and given the former organization's interest in mass production and industrialization. Led by the era's most prolific technical innovators, the ASME consisted of precisely those "professional scientifically trained mind[s]," as its official history describes them,

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81 Ibid., 110. See also Naima Prevots, *American Pageantry: A Movement for Art and Democracy* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990), 1-12.
82 Oliver M. Sayler, "The Return of the Pilgrim," *The New Republic* XXVII, no. 349 (August 9, 1921), 302.
83 See A.J. Philpott, "Final Performance of Pilgrim Pageant," *Boston Daily Globe*, August 14, 1921.

produced by an ever more utilitarian education system; like that system, the ASME instilled in its members the "qualities of leadership in the processes of production, so that the engineer is often also a business man."[84] Moreover, in bringing together "designers and managers of the producing machine shop" with "engineers of production [in] factories and power plants," the organization helped reengineer the workshop in the image of the industrial manufactory, serving in fact as a vehicle for the expropriation of craft epistemologies.[85] Baker had wandered far, it may seem, from an American Arts and Crafts movement dedicated to the "intelligent man, whose ability is used as a whole, and not subdivided for commercial purposes."[86]

Yet if the specifications enforced by the ASME—regulating everything from plumbing fixtures to power plant systems—contributed to the growing influence of a professional-managerial class, they also represented an effort to maintain technical, craft-like standards within an industrial-corporate regime. That effort, undertaken alongside post-bellum industrialization, had been a response to ubiquitous mechanical failures in the second half of the nineteenth century, failures particularly rampant among equipment powered by steam-pressure. The enforcing of technical standards seemed especially urgent in the wake of the 1905 disaster at the Grover Shoe Factory in Brockton, Massachusetts, where, on the morning of March 10, a boiler exploded in the factory's basement, rocketing upward through three floors and killing 58 people in the ensuing conflagration. Widely covered in national newspapers—among them the *New York Times*, the *Salt Lake Herald*, and *The Evening Statesman* from Walla Walla, Washington—the disaster prompted the ASME to develop a "Boiler & Pressure Vessel Code" regulating the production and maintenance of steam-pressurized equipment, legislation later incorporated into U.S. law.[87] Baker might, therefore, have recognized in

[84] Frederick Remson Hutton, *A History of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers* (New York: ASME, 1915), 10.
[85] Ibid., 1.
[86] SACB, *Handicraft* 1.1, NP.
[87] "Explosion Kills 53; Many Are Missing," *New York Times*, March 21, 1905. "Died Sitting in His Chair," *Salt Lake Herald*, March 22, 1905. "Fifty Perish in Factory Fire; Boiler Explosion Wrecks Plant," *The Evening Statesman*, March 20, 1905.

the ASME an attempt to translate into an industrial context that aspect of a craft ideal which emphasized workers' fastidious adherence to technical standards—Baker himself had long held his students to precisely those standards.

Regardless of his views toward the ASME, Baker relished the opportunity—and certainly the financial backing—to realize further the possibilities of dramatic form. Titled *Control*, his pageant was staged at the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken the weekend of April 5, 1930, and tracked the development of the ASME from its founding in 1880 through the present moment in mechanical engineering. In doing so, it warned against the perils of industrialization and urged the reconciliation, through craft standards, of beauty and utility. For the most elaborate production of his career, Baker returned to an idea that had been his life's work—namely, that the well-crafted drama offered a way to rethink the meaning and ramifications of labor in an industrial context, specifically by modeling in aesthetic form more engaged, socially responsible work. To recall Lears's terminology, *Control* reads as "accommodationist" and "oppositional" at once, its ideological complexity betraying the limitations of such a framework, and asking us, in place of moralistic evaluation, to hold both possibilities in mind simultaneously. *Control* itself deftly negotiates these possibilities, making it an important—if not obvious—text in American antimodernism.

Control

As reported by *Science* in its coverage leading up to and succeeding the ASME's 50th anniversary, *Control* was to serve as the culmination of a weekend of activities that opened with a toast from Charles Schwab at the Hotel Roosevelt in New York and concluded, three days later, at the Chamber of Commerce in Washington, D.C., no small engineering feat in its own right.[88] Baker himself had decamped for Yale four years earlier, after that institution had agreed to build the

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[88] Untitled, *Science* 71, no. 1839 (March 28, 1930), 334-335.

theater—complete with carpenter shop, paint studio, sewing room, and electricians' gantries—so long denied him at Harvard. The production crew for *Control*, therefore, came almost entirely from Yale's Department of Drama, including lighting technician Stanley R. McCandless and visionary design student-turned-professor Frank Poole Bevan as costume designer.

Demonstrating humanity's increasing "control" over the natural environment, the pageant is composed of a series of vignettes drawn from pivotal moments in the history of mechanical engineering, from James Watt's creation of the steam engine to George Stephenson's floating of a railroad across Chat Moss. One vignette, detailing the invention of electric light, takes up the life of Thomas Edison at precisely the moment he manages to balance the distribution of electricity across a city block, to control bodily, Baker might say, the spirit of illumination. "Hey! Look at the rest of the street," a bystander shouts in wonder. "[A]ll up and down it is lighted just the same!" And Edison, in language that might have been pulled from 47 Workshop notes, explains that while the "best incandescent lamp requires 138 foot-pounds of energy per second," his own "new light requires but 39.6 foot-pounds," describing luminous expression in terms of its technical standards.[89] These historical vignettes, in turn, come nested within an over-arching bildungsroman revolving around the figure of Control, one of four allegorical characters—the others being Conversion, Intelligence, and Imagination—whose coming-of-age represents broader civilizational development. It is Control, as his name suggests, who provides the narration linking the pageant's multiple vignettes, relating for example that "within a year George Stephenson, the man whose motto was 'Persevere,' got a bill through Parliament [and] successfully drove across Chat Moss his engine, the Rocket." "*Here*," Baker's stage directions signal, "*appears film of the original engine*," one of several episodes in the pageant to employ multiple media at the same time.[90] Its dialogue pulled from

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[89] George Pierce Baker, *Control: A Pageant of Engineering Progress* (NP: The American Society of Mechanical Engineers, 1930), 55.

[90] Ibid., 30-31.

historical records, *Control* thus functions as an origin story for that early twentieth-century professional turned out in increasing numbers by American universities, a Veblenesque expert who had become, as Mature Control declares near the pageant's conclusion, "a controlling force" in American culture.[91] At the same time, Mature Control makes explicit the pageant's most prominent theme, reminding the audience of mechanical engineers that "ever with use and power Beauty comes"—by now a familiar refrain.[92]

As with dramatic realism, the pageant's historical material required an approach to drama as a total art, one drawing significantly on the new stagecraft that was just beginning, owing to Baker's efforts, to take root in the American theater. "Obviously," Baker wrote in a preface to the pageant's typescript, "much of the material [illustrating] the remarkable development of mechanical engineering in the past fifty years, and the growing sense in such work that beauty may and must be combined with utility and power, have demanded the use of the motion picture instead of tableaux." Moreover, as the pageant celebrated the increasing influence of the mechanical engineer, "it has seemed wiser to do without a band or orchestra, and to substitute electrical reproduction."[93] In its very form, in other words—and like Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*—*Control* enacts the celebration of technological innovation that is its subject, incorporating film sequences, dramatic lighting effects, music from Antonín Dvořák's *New World Symphony* and Felix Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a "march of the schools" with standard bearers from 26 universities, and Bevan's sumptuous costume design, at once classic and futuristic. The allegorical figure of Conversion [*fig.* 1.7], for instance, one of Bevan's most compelling costumes, is rendered with the pageant's characteristic angularity; dressed in toga-like robes and a headdress reminiscent of ancient laurels, the figure sports a kind of gear or sprocket for a chestplate and, in place of one hand, an electrical capacitor sparking

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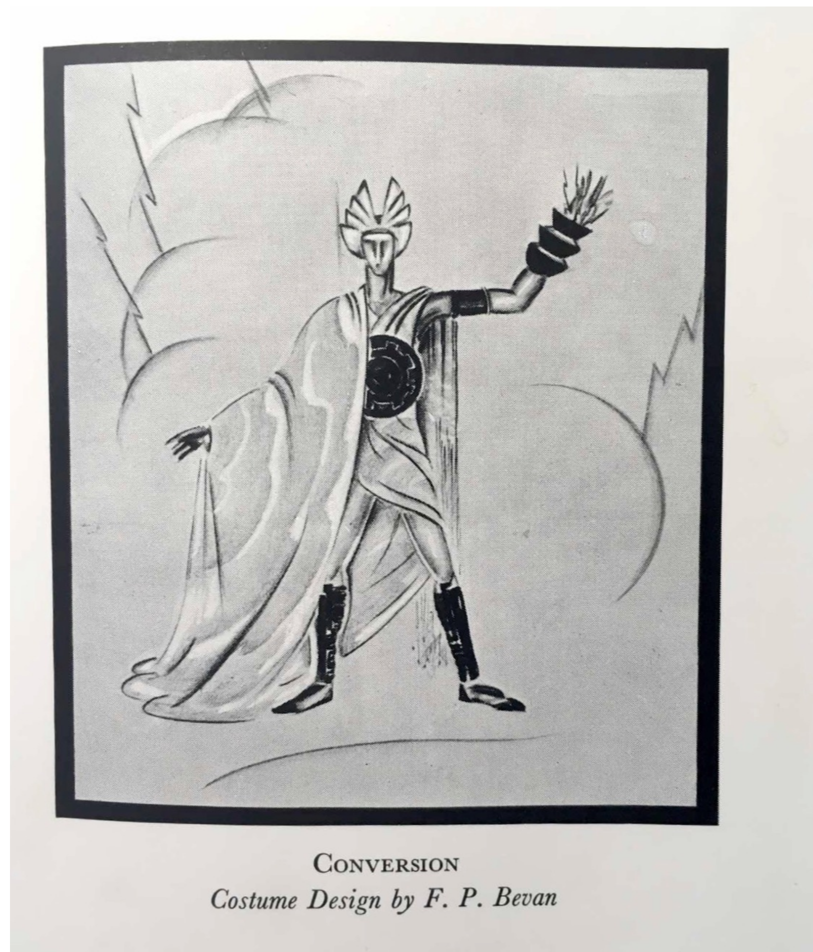
91 Ibid., 49.
92 Ibid., 59.
93 Ibid., v.

like a torch, an almost weapon-like prosthesis. Mediating between what Baker called the "ethical" or thesis-driven drama and "utilitarian" mass entertainment, *Control* is quite simply both at once, the well-crafted dramatic production


CONVERSION
Costume Design by F. P. Bevan

[*fig.* 1.7] Frank Poole Bevan's design for the character of Conversion in Baker's pageant *Control*.

The new stagecraft employed by Baker figures most prominently in the pageant's opening and closing scenes, multimedia tableaux bookending the development of Child Control into Mature Control and, more generally, the evolution of human civilization. Preceding its vignette-like accounts of Watt, Stephenson, et al., *Control* opens at the very dawn of human existence, a filmic montage depicting great rivers, seascapes, forests, and lava flows out of which appear tool-wielding

Neanderthals walking ever more upright through the mist. From behind the projection screen, a procession of SIT student actors moves across the stage, Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks, all bearing items such as rugs, mantles, costumes, and pottery. Important in this procession is the fact that, as humans evolve, so too do their tools, from primitive stoneware to increasingly aestheticized craft objects; the pageant's opening sequence thus positions the ASME not as some modern force for industrialization but as a natural, almost organic, stage in human development. The illumination soon after of the pageant stage proper—"*strong, although not extremely strong light*"—therefore represents more than a literal enlightenment.[94] In the same way, the pageant's conclusion situates films of modern dams and bridges as visual backing for a climactic paean to the potential beauty of industrial engineering. "Ever growing in beauty," chant the figures of Control, Conversion, Intelligence, and Imagination—a kind of Greek chorus—after which Beauty herself emerges in a "great glow of light and color," proclaiming herself the child of Imagination and Mature Control.[95] Even as the movement itself had begun to die out, Baker translates American Arts and Crafts values into an industrial context, urging the reconciliation of beauty and utility and enacting that union in his own stagecraft. As Beauty retreats offstage, no less telling an opera than Wagner's *Siegfried* fades away. Appearing via "special equipment loaned by Electrical Research Products," President Hoover delivers a closing exhortation to the pageant's audience, the first notes of "America the Beautiful" echoing through the theater.[96]

The climax would look farcical today—something out of Kubrick perhaps—but its most remarkable feature is the way it positions the entire history of engineering as culminating in the present place and time, "America the Beautiful" being accompanied by film footage of the New York skyline shot from across the Hudson River in Hoboken. As they left the auditorium at SIT

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[94] Ibid., 7.
[95] Ibid., 60-61.
[96] Ibid., 63.

that night, Baker's audience of mechanical engineers would have stared out at exactly that scene, viewing the city—its electrical lights and roaring subways, its untold wonders of machine engineering—as an inheritance toward which all human history had been tending.[97] It is a triumph of the "total work of art" that as its audience members exit they also enter, finding the art work itself suddenly turned inside out. But the pageant's evolutionary arc, as Baker treats it, is not ultimately a natural or foreordained trajectory; rather, the present industrial-corporate regime has been midwifed by those educational institutions through which its beneficiaries have passed. "Come now the Schools," declares Control halfway through the pageant. "Come the Departments!"[98] And, on cue, standard bearers from 26 universities—from MIT to the University of California—process down the aisles in a fourth-wall shattering "March of the Schools."[99] Just as Baker used the 47 Workshop as a means of elevating public taste in the drama, *Control* represents higher education as critical in raising an emergent professional-managerial class of engineers above mere utilitarianism. The contemporary moment in engineering may be the result of an eons-long evolutionary arc, Baker suggested, but it is no more inevitable—or unalterable—than the Broadway spectacle.

The Craftsman and the Technician: Re-Crafting Creative Writing

Like *The Pilgrim Spirit* before it, *Control* is a fascinating example of the historical pageant, a genre critically under-appreciated despite its importance as a mixed media phenomenon in the early twentieth century. While *The Pilgrim Spirit* dutifully participated in the genre's project of buttressing national identity, *Control* was less sanguine about that project, at least insofar as "American" identity was defined by mass production and the commercialism of the Broadway drama. Craft rhetoric and practice was key to Baker's challenge of that commercialism, as it was to his critique of the wider

[97] Ibid., 61.
[98] Ibid., 41.
[99] Ibid., x.

industrial-corporate regime that lay behind it. Though craft production itself had become a moribund proposition, Baker's work in the pageant form and the 47 Workshop helped institutionalize craft as an aesthetic practice, ironically laying the foundation for that other soon-to-explode industry—the MFA.

My genealogy for that industry has implicitly questioned its standard origin stories, particularly Mark McGurl's contention that creative writing begins as an aspect of progressive education. Committed to the values of individuality and self-expression, the progressive movement, in McGurl's narrative, was facilitated institutionally by the development of an "elective system" that emphasized "the student's interest in his studies and the diversity of those interests (and abilities) from student to student."[100] As creative writing, around mid-century, entered graduate institutions dominated by the New Criticism, self-expression became a concern secondary to "the classically modernist value of impersonality," an aesthetic formalism achieved, McGurl holds, through the "discipline" of creative writing craft; the result was a creative mode which McGurl, somewhat archly, calls "programmatic self-expression."[101]

McGurl's narrative is a compelling one, not least for its attention to how postwar aesthetic formations formally encode the "program" within which they are produced; the restrained short stories of Flannery O'Connor, for example, with their efficient narrative structure and rigorous impersonality, embody a "masochistic aesthetics of institutionalization" in which creative writing craft holds the whip to the erstwhile expressive artist.[102] Still, this chapter has challenged McGurl's narrative at a number of points. First, as the elective system developed at Harvard—where the first workshop came to fruition and where other forms of creative writing had been taught in advanced composition courses since 1880—it served less as an instrument for individual freedom than a

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[100] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 94.
[101] Ibid., 23, 11.
[102] Ibid., 135.

means of adapting higher education to the needs of an industrializing nation.[103] Whether the objective was composing fiction, journalism, or drama, creative writing was rarely understood as self-expression—it was vocational training. Second, before mid-century creative writing programs institutionalized "programmatic self-expression," that mode characterized an ideal of aesthetic production upheld by the American Arts and Crafts movement, for whom proper craftsmanship adhered to rigorously programmatic standards—like those enforced by pre-industrial guilds—while also allowing for engaged, even expressive, labor. Put broadly, the fact that creative writing's most iconic graduate programs arose contemporaneous with the rise-to-power of the New Critics—and that such programs were in some cases organized around New Critical "impersonality"—has obscured from hindsight the earlier origin of "workshop" in the American Arts and Crafts movement.

Like his teacher, John Dos Passos turned to the well-crafted drama as a means of rectifying American cultural standards and of challenging regnant regimes of production. As Baker's affinity with the American Arts and Crafts movement yielded to Dos Passos's more idiosyncratic leftism, the drama continued to bridge what Baker called the "utilitarian" and "ethical" functions of the theater, so that "the problems of the sociologist, the questions that beset the psychologist, the pathologist, the philosopher, open[ed] out before the dramatist."[104] Indeed, Dos Passos's dramatic productions skewed as heavily toward "ethical" content as anything yet seen on the American stage, eschewing both pageantry and realist characterization in favor, in many cases, of direct critique of U.S. capitalism. While middle-class audiences largely ignored these productions—having no qualms at the time with a roaring American economy—Dos Passos's early experiments in the drama would prove integral to his subsequent efforts to reengineer the novel; in both genres, Dos Passos refigured the writer not as a craftsman but as an engineering "technician," a literary designer whose

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[103] On advanced composition at Harvard, an alternative origin story for creative writing, see Adams, *History*, 16-60.
[104] Baker, "The theater during this century," 7.

critique of industrialism rested on his adherence to modernist technical standards. In a second chapter, I show how Dos Passos's technician embodies one aspect of a craft ideal which, in the 1930s, cleaves into opposing factions of the literary Left, with one faction organized around self-expressive proletarian workers and the other—like Dos Passos—prioritizing the writer's virtuosic mastery of aesthetic standards. Here, however, I close by briefly sketching how Dos Passos's articulation of "the writer as technician" emerges out of and reworks American Arts and Crafts ideology, tracing that evolution in his little-known play, *Airways, Inc.* In that play, the craftsman at last exchanges his hammer for a drafting set.

III. John Dos Passos and *Airways, Inc.*

"Between high mass […] and Barnum and Bailey's circus": New Playwrights Theatre

Before his fiction vaulted him into the literary spotlight, John Dos Passos participated intimately with an experimental "Little Theater Movement" stocked with Baker acolytes and 47 Workshop alums. As part of the New Playwrights Theatre, Dos Passos—along with future nemesis Mike Gold and others—endeavored to create a cooperative, craft-based theater that might, through integration of the dramatic arts, supplant Broadway commercialism and the broader economic regime which underwrote it. As in the 47 Workshop, Dos Passos's commitment to the new stagecraft eventuated from the kind of material he wanted to stage, namely "the side of the American mass myth that the musical comedies leave out."[105] Dos Passos himself, who had contemplated a career in architecture at Harvard, was particularly interested in the possibilities of staging and set design. While New Playwrights was short-lived, running only from 1927 to 1929, it should be viewed as part of a wider process of experiment and exploration that transformed American drama during the first decades of

[105] John Dos Passos, "The American Theatre: Is the Whole Show on the Skids?," in *Three Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), xx.

the twentieth century. In the last section of this chapter, I examine Dos Passos's dramatic work as a direct inheritance of Baker's legacy. For Baker, as I've suggested, one crucial aspect of the well-crafted drama was its reconciliation of the theater's "ethical" and "utilitarian" functions, a union Dos Passos explicitly adapted in *Airways, Inc.*, joining what he called the "serious" and "boxoffice" halves of the U.S. entertainment industry.[106] At the same time, *Airways, Inc.* retools the American Arts and Crafts ideology promoted by his former teacher, as the character of "Professor" envisions the evolution of mental labor from a kind of craftsmanship to a form of technical engineering. Dos Passos's playwriting has been critically neglected, but it reveals, once again, how craft rhetoric and practice reoriented early twentieth-century literature within its institutional context; in turn, that context—the American theater—offered a way for craft practitioners to stage a wider intervention in labor and culture. Finally, renewed attention to Dos Passos's drama helps clarify how the discipline of creative writing evolved as it migrated from the American Arts and Crafts movement into a leftist campaign with its own distinct—and decidedly more radical—ambitions for the creative writer.

No archival evidence exists linking Dos Passos explicitly with the 47 Workshop, though he seems by several accounts to have taken at least one other Baker offering at Harvard, most likely "The Technique of the Drama," prerequisite to the 47 Workshop proper.[107] Many of Dos Passos's closest friends, moreover, were Workshop participants, including Edward Massey, who would later direct Dos Passos's play *The Moon is a Gong* for the Harvard Dramatic Club, a group closely affiliated with the 47 Workshop. Produced in 1925, that play was Dos Passos's first effort at the well-crafted drama, an elaborately staged work combining "boxoffice" elements such as burlesque and

[106] John Dos Passos, "Introduction to *The Garbage Man*," in *Three Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), 75.

[107] See, among others, Robert M. Dowling, *Eugene O'Neill: A Life in Four Acts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 504; Malcolm Johnson, "The Yale Rep Goes to Harvard," *New York Times*, September 9, 1979; and D.G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 68.

syncopated music with "serious" content drawn from tragedy, surrealism, and leftist critique. The play was a failure—a patchwork of various modes, compositionally uneven, overly sentimental—but it convinced Dos Passos that audiences needed further exposure to experimental theater in order to grasp its social import. A year later—ten years after graduating from Harvard—Dos Passos undertook his own pedagogical initiative in founding New Playwrights Theatre, one of a number of little theaters then operating in the East and West Villages. Like many of those ventures, New Playwrights held that the U.S. entertainment industry had become little more than a prop for "the imperialist prosperity myth."[108] The drama, Dos Passos wrote, "oughtn't to be expected to pay any more than an artgallery or a library. […] If the theater doesn't become a transformer for the deep high tension currents of history, it's deader than cockfighting."[109] New Playwrights would thus draw its material from—and appeal directly to—the industrial and white-collar working classes, rejecting Broadway audiences consisting, as Dos Passos put it, of "literary-minded people who seek in culture a dope to make them dream that they live […] in a Louis Quinze drawing room."[110]

For Dos Passos, direct appeal to the working classes required a startling new stagecraft, the end goal of which was less dramatic realism than "something between high mass in a Catholic church and Barnum and Bailey's circus."[111] Integrating elements of mass theater with Brecht-like estrangement—though Dos Passos was unfamiliar with Brecht's work—New Playwrights sought to involve its audiences materially in the productive labor of the drama, fostering what Dos Passos called an "active working audience" similar to that of the 47 Workshop; breaking the fourth wall, for example, represented for Dos Passos a uniquely theatrical strategy, one that distinguished the genre

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[108] Dos Passos, "The American Theatre," xxi.

[109] Ibid., xxi-xxii.

[110] John Dos Passos, "Is the 'Realistic' Theatre Obsolete,' in *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose*, ed. Donald Pizer (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 76. Dos Passos advances similar characterizations of Broadway theater in *Manhattan Transfer*, describing the preference of audiences for "detective melodrama or a rotten French farce." See John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925), 261-262.

[111] John Dos Passos, "Towards a Revolutionary Theatre," *New Masses* 3, no. 8 (December 1927): 20.

from rival forms like film and radio.[112] "The movies have made the theatre of the transparent fourth wall unnecessary and obsolete," Dos Passos wrote.

> The camera and screen can transport the audience into circumstances, in the ordinary sense, real. […] The theatre can only bungle at it clumsily. Therefore, if the theatre is going to survive, it has got to find for itself a new function.[113]

As in the 47 Workshop, stagecraft was not an end in itself, then, but a means toward realization of the drama's form and purpose; so integral was this stagecraft that when Dos Passos spoofed New Playwrights in his novel *Most Likely to Succeed* he rechristened it the "Craftsman's Theater." A first step, he wrote elsewhere, "towards realizing a revolutionary theatre seems to me to be to work with new tools."[114] Fittingly, the idea of craftsmanship would figure prominently in the last play New Playwrights produced, Dos Passos's *Airways, Inc.* In it, Dos Passos juxtaposes various forms of craft labor—among them carpentry, airplane construction, and piloting—with an evolving industrial-corporate regime and the systems of financial speculation subtending it. Eyeing the ramshackle construction of a new suburban development, one of the play's protagonists, named simply "Dad," laments the inhumane nature of mass production. "Maisonette's knocked together out of laths and plaster and enamel paint and kindlin' wood," Dad complains, "and no place for an old man in them, no place for a tired man without a job."[115] If Dad waxes nostalgic over a bygone era of craftsmanship, however, *Airways Inc.* ultimately stages the evanescence of that ideal, imaging new forms of labor for worker and writer alike. For outside of the theater the American Arts and Crafts movement itself had begun to fragment, cleaving—as I show in the second chapter—into opposed factions of the U.S. Left and into multiple craft-inspired initiatives like Black Mountain College and "Prairie" and "Country Day" schools of architecture. As Dos Passos keenly perceived, the era of the writer-as-craftsman had passed.

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[112] Ibid., 20.
[113] Dos Passos, " 'Realistic' Theatre," 77.
[114] John Dos Passos, "Did the New Playwrights Theatre Fail?," *New Masses* 5, no. 3 (August 1929): 13.
[115] John Dos Passos, *Airways, Inc.*, in *Three Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), 98.

"We worked in those days": *Airways, Inc.*

Directed by 47 Workshop alum Edward Massey, *Airways, Inc.* was produced at New Playwrights Theatre in the spring of 1929. Among the features of the play's innovative stagecraft was its incorporation of film and radio, an "interlude" style of action in which events occurred simultaneously throughout the theater, and most importantly its use of a thrust rather than picture-frame stage, an apron having been extended over the orchestra pit in order to bring the action nearer the "active working audience" that Dos Passos sought. That audience, in turn, was afforded a glimpse of the labor undergirding aesthetic production, with costume and scene changes made in full view, and with actors breaking character to assist in the handling of stage equipment. The play itself opens with a meditation on the evolving nature of American labor, juxtaposing carpenters' work on an unfinished suburb with emergent regimes of finance and industry. As the "sound of sawing and hammering" reverberates, "two real estate men, IRVING BLOOMSTEIN and EMANUEL KLEIN enter […] looking about them with an appraising air."[116] The pun, like the anti-Semitism, is obvious, though the neighborhood appraised by Bloomstein and Klein is also surrounded by the industrial plants of the "Swastika Refrigeration Company," Dos Passos figuring craftsmanship as uniquely "American" labor threatened by European new economies. It is those economies—a consortium of interlocking financial and industrial interests—that imperil and ultimately destroy the lives of the working-class Turner family, six figures living together in a ramshackle cottage hunkered in the shadow of nearby factories. Martha Turner, for instance, becomes involved with her fiancé, Walter, in a carpenters' strike that halts construction on the unfinished development; a stand-in for Sacco and Vanzetti, executed two years earlier, Walter is eventually electrocuted after being framed for shooting a sheriff's deputy during a riot between police and strikers. Eddy Turner, Martha's brother, attends night school in the hope of getting work as a union carpenter, eventually

[116] Ibid., 81-82.

abandoning this dream in order to become a shoe salesman, a job that leaves him more time, he says, for leisure activities like "see[ing] a good picture for a change."[117]

The play's central figure—most actively engaged with its economic antagonists, and thus serving as a vehicle for Dos Passos's political agenda—is Elmer Turner, an ace pilot modeled after Charles Lindbergh whose coming-to-consciousness as a worker constitutes the play's primary action. At the beginning of the play, however, Elmer remains blissfully ignorant of class struggle, mocking Martha and Walter for their participation in the strike and signing on as a celebrity promoter for Bloomstein's rapacious All-American Airways, Inc. Such promotional partnerships, Roger Bilstein demonstrates, were common for pilots in the early years of commercial aviation, perceived, as pilots were, as icons of class, quality, and respectability; Lucky Strike cigarettes, for instance, gained notoriety through endorsements not only from pilots but from ground crews and air-traffic controllers as well. "The cachet of aeronautical association," Bilstein writes, extended from "'Wings' brand shirts to […] typewriters designed especially for air travelers, but obviously highly desirable for the average consumer who wanted only the best."[118] Like many early airlines, All-American was ostensibly founded, as one of its board members states, to "fulfill a great scientific and patriotic duty," namely to serve the military-industrial complex by "turn[ing] seventy-five bombing planes over to the government at twenty-four hours' notice."[119] The true purpose of All-American, however, is speculative, to "not be devoid of profit to the stockholders."[120] Elmer himself aspires to become one of those stockholders, longing for a financial stake in the 51% of stock the board has apportioned among itself—the board, for its part, refuses Elmer, relegating him to the status of common laborer.

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[117] Ibid., 84.

[118] Roger Bilstein, "The Airplane and the American Experience," in *The Airplane in American Culture*, ed. Dominick A. Pisano (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 24.

[119] Dos Passos, *Airways, Inc.*, 125, 150.

[120] Ibid., 125.

Just as Elmer harbors dreams of economic self-sufficiency, he also longs for the autonomy to construct his own airplane, to "build my boat," as he puts it, blueprints in hand, eyes wide with an optimism woefully misplaced in midst of the corporation's initial public offering.[121] At the time, aircraft manufacturing still drew heavily on craft technique, requiring, Bilstein explains, the "time-honored vocations of cabinetmakers, tinsmiths, coppersmiths, and even seamstresses. The careful work they lavished on each 'plane' imparted to it an individuality compounded of skilled craftsmanship, knowledge, and love."[122] So fastidious was the craftsmanship of airplane-makers that journalist Stuart Chase was put "in mind of the builders of Chartres" when he encountered such craft, naming the very structure which, a century earlier, had inspired the founders of the original Arts and Crafts movement.[123] In the same way, in other words, that the play juxtaposes carpentry with those economic forces that imperil it, so too does it image in Elmer the expropriation of craft epistemologies and worker autonomy, gesturing toward new assembly-line techniques that would soon dominate the airline industry and every other. "It is sad," wrote Chase, "to think of mass production hanging like a sword of Damocles" above the heads of craftsmen.[124] Documenting the industrialization and financialization of aircraft manufacturing, *Airways, Inc.* stages anew the confrontation between authority and autonomy that Richard Sennett identifies at the heart of the craft workshop; as in the 47 Workshop, Elmer's autonomy as a craft producer—of aircraft rather than stagecraft—is held in check by the collective authority not of an audience but of an executive board. As one of All-American's executives says of him while Elmer wrangles ham-handedly for a portion of the company's stock, "Don't mind him."[125]

Moreover, because that board consists of the same financial magnates who underwrite the play's

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[121] Ibid., 125.
[122] Bilstein, "The Airplane," 21.
[123] Quoted in Bilstein, "The Airplane," 21.
[124] Ibid., 22.
[125] Dos Passos, *Airways, Inc.*, 125.

real-estate market, Elmer is eventually tasked with air-dropping Chamber of Commerce pamphlets over the construction strike led by his sister and brother-in-law. "I don't see that it hurts the strikers any," Elmer rationalizes to Martha. "They're paying [me] a hundred bucks an hour for doing the trick."[126] It is during one of these runs that Elmer, having already lost financial and manufacturing autonomy, loses physical control of his aircraft as well, entering a tailspin and crashing off-stage, ultimately fracturing his spine and becoming paralyzed for the remainder of the play. If the crash paralyzes him physically, however, it also awakens Elmer to the urgency of the class struggle being waged by Martha and Walter. "They don't give a damn about me or aviation or anything," Elmer recognizes of the executive board, propped up in his convalescent bed. "All they see is a chance to scoop up some easy cash."[127] Later, his resentment becomes personal. "It isn't right the way they won't let me have anything to do with All-American," he says. "Every time I ask Dave about it, he just kids me along."[128] By play's end, so outraged has Elmer become that Martha mistakes him for her executed fiancé, the implication being that Elmer too—after his literal and metaphorical coming-to-consciousness—will now take up the mantle of proletarian rebellion. Elmer's conversion to working-class resistance thus follows the familiar model of the hero's awakening to his own class positionality, a model common among proletarian cultural forms of the 1920s and 30s. "In these texts," Barbara Foley writes, "the protagonist's espousal of—or at least growth toward—revolutionary class consciousness embodies in microcosm the change that is occurring, and must continue to occur on a larger scale, in the working class."[129] In the figure of Elmer, Dos Passos asks his "active working audience" to envision itself as exactly that.

It was in part the ease of Elmer's conversion that contributed to the critical and financial failure

[126] Ibid., 133.
[127] Ibid., 128.
[128] Ibid., 149.
[129] Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 327.

of *Airways, Inc.*, which ultimately ran for less than a month before the entire New Playwrights project collapsed. Many critics described the play as a hodgepodge of leftist ideals, citing its apparent lack of dramatic unity and the failure of its narrative threads—particularly its romantic and political plots—meaningfully to converge.[130] Mike Gold was more optimistic, finding in *Airways, Inc.* indication that "the American chaos could be conquered," and that simply ignoring such injustice "was no longer [Dos Passos's] answer to the cruelty men have done with the help of Machines."[131] In *The New Republic*, likewise, Edmund Wilson thought the play the best New Playwrights had ever produced, though he found Dos Passos himself "less expert as a dramatist than as a novelist."[132] No small part of Dos Passos's expertise in the novel, however, owed to the experimental techniques he pioneered on stage, including the interlude-style juxtaposition of related narratives and the collagist language pastiches that would become the newsreels of *Manhattan Transfer* and the *U.S.A.* trilogy. These techniques are most apparent, in *Airways, Inc.*, in Dos Passos's treatment of a character known only as "Professor," a former eastern European revolutionary who acts as the play's narrative voice, contextualizing its working-class strife within a global newsscape. "Riots in Poland, mobilization ordered in Jugo-Slavia," Professor narrates during the fever pitch of the strike. "So many bottles of nitroglycerin on a shelf. […] A scuffle and they all drop."[133] If such techniques proved effective on the page, theater-going audiences found them disorienting, a distraction from an interpersonal drama that was itself never fully realized, its characters tending toward types rather than realistic personalities.

The figure of Professor is integral, however, to the play's transition from halcyon craftsmanship to emergent industrial manufacturing. Looking back wistfully on an era of fulfilling labor, Professor seems in part a winking allusion to Dos Passos' own professor, George Pierce Baker, describing a

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130 See especially Virginia Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1984), 251.
131 Michael Gold, "The Education of John Dos Passos," *English Journal* 22, no. 2 (February 1933): 95.
132 Edmund Wilson, "Dahlberg, Dos Passos, and Wilder," *The New Republic* XXXVI, no. 62 (March 26, 1930), 157.
133 Dos Passos, *Airways, Inc.*, 115.

time when "work, worked, we worked in those days for the instruction of the people, worked. […] Every time I moved it was pleasure, the twist and untwist of my arms…We were unloading melons […] then they slipped from my hands into another man's hands."[134] Seated in one scene in what the stage directions refer to as a "Morris chair"—callback to the founder of the original Arts and Crafts movement—Professor is given some of the play's best lines in set-piece speeches about the dignity of craft labor and the perils of industrialization. "The world was a huge ball then," he romanticizes,

> the universe a mighty harmony of ellipses, everything moved mysteriously, incalculable distances through the ether. We used to feel the awe of the distant stars upon us. All that led to was the eighty-eight naval guns, ersatz, and the night airraids over cities. […] Nowhere is far anymore. Distance has snapped back in my face like a broken elastic.[135]

Citing the classic image of machine-age planned obsolescence, Professor is key to Dos Passos's rethinking, through craft rhetoric and practice, of the meaning and ramifications of labor in an industrial context. While Baker confronted an evolving industrial-corporate regime with a reminder of the aesthetic potential of labor—"ever growing in beauty"—Dos Passos recognized that beauty itself had become obsolete, vanished, along with human wonder and awe, in a world of perpetual warfare and outsized industrial-corporate manufacturing. The image of labor with which *Airways, Inc.* concludes is decidedly postlapsarian.

Yet Professor does not simply revel in nostalgia for craftsmanship, but instead looks forward as Dos Passos did to new modes of labor for worker and writer alike. In his own conversion at play's end, Professor exhorts the audience to "make ourselves machines" in order to confront the injustices of industrialization, turning "our hearts into dynamos, our blood into electric current." While Elmer will never fly again, his work toward proletarian revolution necessitates that his body itself become the honed, hardened instrument he controls. "Look at my hand," Professor commands. "The soft twitching flesh is drying up into steel. […] Man is the last machine we must

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[134] Ibid., 152.
[135] Ibid., 93.

invent."[136] For Dos Passos, aesthetic producers in particular needed to become efficient experts whose labor might organize and direct the wider mass of American workers; the writer, Dos Passos argued, was a "technician just as much as an electrical engineer is."[137] Coordinating disciplines and discourses, the work of the writer-technician drew, as I show in the next chapter, on that aspect of an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal which stressed the worker's adherence to technical standards, in this case the standards of modernist aesthetics. Being able to "put the words down on paper" no more made one a writer, in Dos Passos's view, "than the fact that he can scratch up the ground and plant seeds in it makes him a farmer, or that he can trail a handline overboard makes him a fisherman."[138] Nearly half a century after Eliot's reforms in the name of utilitarian education, Dos Passos's writer is the very image of the "cutting-tool, a drill, or auger" by which the former described his ideal student, juxtaposing academic specialization, as Eliot did, with the image of the mind as "a globe, to be expanded symmetrically […] outward." Dos Passos learned more at Harvard, it would seem, than simply the craft of playwriting.

I have suggested that the discipline of creative writing, in particular the rhetoric and practice of workshop, began with a form of "programmatic self-expression" adapted from the American Arts and Crafts movement, a group for whom craftsmanship proper consisted of engaged, even expressive labor which adhered simultaneously to technical standards like those enforced by pre-industrial guilds. Renewed attention to Dos Passos's early work in the drama reveals how his influential figuration of "the writer as technician" grew out of this context, stressing technical standards while downplaying—even explicitly challenging—more self-expressive aesthetics. The "programmatic self-expression" that scholars have read as a distinguishing feature of postwar creative writing programs in fact predates those programs by nearly fifty years, originating not in the

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[136] Ibid., 155.

[137] John Dos Passos, "The Writer as Technician," in *American Writers' Congress*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 79.

[138] Ibid., 78.

MFA but in the American Arts and Crafts movement and, soon after, under an entirely different program—the CPUSA.

Chapter Two

A Vast University of the Common People: Meridel Le Sueur and the 1930s Literary Left

Overture: Minneapolis, 1934

In the summer of 1934, as record-breaking heat waves throttled the Plains states, and as the Depression deepened to its nadir, writer Meridel Le Sueur served chicken dinner to 3,000 strikers at the headquarters of General Drivers' Local 574 in Minneapolis. A volunteer in the union's Women's Auxiliary, Le Sueur would document her work that summer in a series of essays in the Communist Party-affiliated *New Masses*, detailing firsthand a strike of Minneapolis transportation companies that brought to a halt virtually all trucking activity in the Twin Cities and which would, by the time it was resolved, dramatically reshape the organization and objectives of American labor relations. "I found the kitchen organized like a factory," Le Sueur wrote. "Nobody asks my name. I am given a large butcher's apron. I realize I have never before worked anonymously."[1]

Until that summer—as significant to U.S. history as the summers of 1863 or 1968—labor advocacy had revolved almost exclusively around the craft-based unions of the American Federation of Labor, reformist orders of construction tradesmen, railway workers, and other skilled laborers eager to defend the traditions and privileges of so-called "craft unionism." With the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act, however—in particular its protections for collective bargaining—the Minneapolis Truckers' Strike became one of several labor initiatives to mobilize unskilled workers across a range of industrial occupations, organizing those workers into non-exclusive industrial unions. Recognition of such unions was a key objective in contemporaneous labor actions among West Coast longshoremen, Toledo auto-parts workers, and among the diverse coalition of truckers, painters, cab drivers, and iron workers who banded together in Minneapolis to agitate for

[1] Meridel Le Sueur, "I Was Marching, "*New Masses* 12, no. 12 (September 18, 1934): 17.

rights long denied them under the more conservative craft unionism of the AFL.

It was the high degree of coordination across these worker groups that distinguished Minneapolis as a labor initiative, with workers picketing key intersections at the city limits, turning back commercial deliveries, and commandeering food and medical supplies from non-union vehicles. Other roving picketers, directed by radio from strike headquarters, criss-crossed the city in "flying squadrons," massing at contested flashpoints and vanishing before authorities could respond. At strike headquarters, Le Sueur and other members of the Women's Auxiliary staffed kitchens, managed commissaries, and assisted in a makeshift hospital for wounded strikers, all while raising funds, intervening with relief boards and government officials, and marching alongside their sons, husbands, and fellow workers. Additionally, a union newspaper, *The Organizer*, marshaled first-person reportage to encourage, entertain, and apprise workers of the latest in strike negotiations. Despite differences in language, culture, and background—and despite their disparate experiences across multiple industrial occupations never before unionized—Minneapolis strikers displayed a remarkable unity of method and purpose, forging themselves into an effective force for labor rights.

By July, their tactics had taken a toll. Under increasing pressure to resolve the strike, Minneapolis administrators forced a confrontation between strikers and city police, endeavoring on the sweltering afternoon of July 21 to move a cargo truck through crowds of picketers in Minneapolis's downtown Market District. As onlookers sweated in the Minnesota heat, the truck inched away from its loading platform and proceeded slowly up Hennepin Avenue. When strikers blocked the vehicle with their own open-bed pickup, police officers opened fire into the massed workers, killing two and wounding fifty in the ensuing chaos. Soon after, Local 574 managed, despite intervention from the National Guard, to secure higher wages, improved working conditions, union recognition, and collective bargaining rights in the vast majority of Minneapolis trucking firms, a landmark victory for advocates of industrial unionism and clear indication that workers across multiple

occupations could work together for wide-ranging reforms.[2]

Inaugurating a new era in labor relations, the Minneapolis Truckers' Strike was also perceived in its immediate aftermath as an unprecedented instance of cross-class collaboration, as intellectual labor leaders harnessed "the native militancy of the masses" and taught mass-production workers "to fight for their rights and [fought] with them." Writing soon afterward in *The New International*, James P. Cannon singled out this aspect of the Truckers' Strike as a harbinger, he hoped, of future developments in the American labor movement. "In other places," Cannon wrote, "strike militancy surged from below and was checked and restrained by the leaders. In Minneapolis it was organized and directed by the leaders."[3] Based out of New York City, Cannon was a leading administrator of the Trotsky-influenced Communist League of America (CLA), and with other strike leaders made up what novelist Charles Rumford Walker labeled a "brain core of military operations" working out of strike headquarters.[4] There, as Cannon described, "a group of determined militants, armed with the most advanced political conceptions, organized the workers in the trucking industry, led them through three strikes within six months and remain today at the head of the union."[5] Indeed, strike headquarters itself—located, ironically, across from the swank Minneapolis Club—proved apt testament to the *savor faire* of strike strategists, a nerve center of sorts strewn with Trotskyist pamphlets, tangled in telephone wires, and cluttered with the detailed cartography of picket locations and incident reports. The Minneapolis Truckers' Strike, in other words, was both a labor action and cross-class pedagogical initiative, with East Coast intellectuals instructing Midwestern workers in the theory and practice of labor militancy, and with working-class strikers, in turn, contributing on-the-ground intelligence and their own local knowledge of Minneapolis and its politics.

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[2] My description of the Minneapolis Truckers' Strike is informed in particular by two incisive studies from Elizabeth Faue and Bryan Palmer. See Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering & Struggle: Women, Men and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991) and Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934* (Boston: Brill, 2013).

[3] James P. Cannon, "Minneapolis and its Meaning," *The New International* 1, no. 1 (June 1934): NP.

[4] Quoted in Palmer, *Teamsters*, 85.

[5] Ibid., 222.

It was this cross-class exchange—between "teamsters and Trotskyists," as one historian puts it—which for Cannon and others constituted the "meaning" of Minneapolis and allowed strikers to outmaneuver not only their employers but virtually every layer of ameliorist government intervention, from city police to President Roosevelt.[6] Gaining momentum over the long summer of 1934, the Minneapolis coalition seemed even more remarkable given that much of the 1930s Left remained riven by factional debates between precisely those groups that the coalition unified—on the one hand, intellectual theoreticians and, on the other, advocates for autochthonous, militant proletarianism. Falling out along Trotskyist and Stalinist lines, these debates would try allegiances, rend cultural institutions, and strain long-held friendships. While their ability to side-step such debates was integral to the success of Minneapolis strikers, elsewhere—and with equally lasting consequences—these debates would prove far more difficult to ignore.

"The philosopher goes to work": A critical prologue

Organized around Le Sueur's literary and political work in Minneapolis, this chapter contends that Left cultural debates of the 1930s—debates about the role, representation, and function of literary leftists in particular—constitute the cleaving of a prior craft ideal dominant in the early twentieth-century American Arts and Crafts movement. As I have described previously, that movement promoted craft—what sociologist Richard Sennett calls "engaged material consciousness"—as workers' engaged, even expressive labor combined with fastidious adherence to technical standards like those enforced by pre-industrial guilds.[7] As craft adherent Denman Ross put it in 1903, in craft "the philosopher goes to work and the working man becomes a philosopher."[8] While one legacy of the American Arts and Crafts movement lies in the subsequent

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[6] Palmer, *Teamsters*, 3.
[7] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 120.
[8] Denman Ross, "The Arts and Crafts: A Diagnosis," *Handicraft* 1, no. 10 (January 1903): 243.

modernism of Falling Water, Eames's "Lounge Chair Wood," and Black Mountain College, in another future—proliferating like a parallel universe or frayed wire—the movement cleaves into opposing factions of the literary Left, each of which in its own way translates the antimodern animus of Arts and Crafts into the radical context of the 1930s United States.

One such faction—organized around John Dos Passos and *Partisan Review* editors Philip Rahv and William Phillips—understood the writer as a "technician" whose responsibility lay not in "the fight for social justice," but in adhering to modernist aesthetic standards. "The aims of the technician," Dos Passos wrote, "insofar as he is a technician and not a timeserver, [are] the development of his material and of the technical possibilities of his work."[9] In contrast, a second faction of the literary Left, organized around Mike Gold's *New Masses*, fostered insurgent working-class consciousness embodied in the self-expressive proletarian writer, a figure Gold himself virtually imagined into existence. While Dos Passos's technician hewed closely to the standards of his art, cultivating that state of mind "in which a man is ready to do good work," Gold's proletarian literally expressed himself in "jets of exasperated feeling," his class positionality leaving him "no time to polish his work."[10] Each faction, in turn, advanced its aesthetic ideology through distinct representations of the worker-writer, what we might schematize as a top-down (writers as workers) versus a bottom-up (workers as writers) dialectic. Drawing on a cultural geography mapped by Jeff Allred, I attend in this chapter to what Laura Rigal has called the "cultural production of production," those representational strategies through which—in addition to strikes, slowdowns, and union organizing—the American labor movement articulated itself, sometimes contradictorily.[11] For in addition to marking the cleavage of a prior craft ideal, the opposed factions of the 1930s

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[9] John Dos Passos, "The Writer as Technician," in *American Writers' Congress*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 80.

[10] Ibid., 81. Mike Gold, "Go Left, Young Writers!," *New Masses* 4, no. 8 (January 1929), 4.

[11] Laura Rigal, *The American Manufactory: Art, Labor, and the World of Things in the Early Republic.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 8.

literary Left manifested a tension within the word "craft" itself, a word which came in the fourteenth century to be associated with the "skill," "dexterity," and "art" of mental power, but which, in its original Old English, exclusively signified manual "power," "physical strength," and "might."[12]

Playing out across a range of journals, lecture circuits, and writers workshops—from those affiliated with Party-backed John Reed Clubs to WPA-sponsored workshops like the one taught by Le Sueur at the Minnesota Labor School—debates between literary technicians and proletarians were part, of course, of a wider contradiction in leftist theory between mental and manual labor; as Michael Denning reminds us in his survey of 1930s cultural formations, "the emergence of 'culture' as a distinct region depends on a social surplus, extracted through exploitative labor relations."[13] Reading the 1930s Left as a schizophrenic inheritance of American Arts and Crafts ideology, however, I show how Left debates provided key rhetoric that influenced later conceptualizations of creative writing craft, in particular a prohibition on didactic politicizing metonymized in that infamous workshop cliché—"show don't tell." For sociologists of creative writing like Mark McGurl, "show don't tell" originates with the New Critical disciplining of self-expression in the name of modernist "impersonality," a discipline enforced—in workshops based on New Critical principles—through the stringencies of craft.[14] As Barbara Foley notes, though, the critique of didacticism begins within the 1930s Left, where a range of writers, including Gold and Dos Passos, expressed reservations about policies dictated from Communist Party cultural bosses.[15] "The function of a revolutionary writer," argued Gold, "is not to suggest political platforms and theses, but to portray the life of the workers."[16] Before there was the "Program Era," in other

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[12] *Oxford English Dictionary, s.v.* "craft, n.," accessed February 21, 2020.

[13] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997), 96.

[14] See especially Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 127-182.

[15] See especially Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 136-167.

[16] Mike Gold, "Notes of the Month," *New Masses* 5, no. 7 (December 1929), 23.

words, there was the literal "program" of the Communist Party.

Examining Le Sueur's creative writing pedagogy and literary production from this period as a case study, I show how leftist writers staked out distinct positions within a discursive field opened up by more theoretical polemics. In their rhetorical figurations of the worker-writer, Gold and Dos Passos constituted two poles along a spectrum of possible figurations; in practice, leftist writers operated inconsistently and heterogeneously between these poles, interrogating ossifying theoretical categories and promoting diverse views of working-class writing. Le Sueur's career, I show, embodies significant tensions within the literary Left, but it also reconstructs a prior ideal of literary craftsmanship which otherwise fragments in the 1930s into opposed factions. Specifically, while her pedagogical and documentary work with the WPA frames aesthetic production as an autochthonous "bottom-up" opposition to economic exploitation, grounding literary agency in proletarian writers, her fiction complicates any reductive notion of "proletarianism," revealing self-consciously modernist aspirations in its virtuosic joining of realist and lyrically experimental modes. That proletarian culture exhibited significant modernist influences—indeed, that proletarianism *was* modernist in many cases—has by now been widely recognized.[17] Rarely acknowledged, however, is how modernist proletarians like Le Sueur not only challenged regnant theoretical binaries, but explicitly positioned themselves as inheritors of a craft ideal, literary craftsmen who insisted that modernism itself was built through American labor.

Blacklisted throughout the immediate postwar era for her continued Party affiliation, Le Sueur experienced a revival of interest in the changed political climate of the 1960s and 70s, her early novels republished by Minneapolis-based West End Press and heralded by scholars for their

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[17] See Foley, *Radical Representations*; Cary Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

contribution to the feminist and regionalist traditions in proletarian writing.[18] This scholarship constitutes an important first step in re-appraising Le Sueur's legacy, but it tends to marginalize her contribution to Left culture in ways that reinscribe the gendered—and regionally biased—divisions of literary labor that attained throughout much of the 1930s. Indebted to but departing from this work, I situate Le Sueur at the nexus of 1930s literary and political culture. Specifically, I read her as a major figure of the 1930s Left who in re-theorizing the relationship between labor and literary production actively engaged the era's most pressing question—just what kind of work is writing? On whose behalf does the poet punch in?

Ultimately, the critical intervention I propose in this chapter is threefold. First, I contend that debates about the role, representation, and function of leftist writers—debates that frequently invoked a craft lexicon—constitute the splitting of a prior craft ideal that reconciled self-expression and technical rigor. More importantly, by tracing "show don't tell" to leftist writing from the 1930s, I make visible workshops programmatically written out of standard histories of creative writing, showing, for example, how WPA-endorsed pedagogies influenced later workshops organized around "New Critical" principles. Finally, in order to make that argument, I resituate Le Sueur at the center of the 1930s Left, reading her reconstruction of craft as a significant influence on U.S. literary and political culture; for Le Sueur, as I show, was simply everywhere in the 1930s, her CV a record of those alphabet agencies that so dramatically reshaped American life throughout the Depression, from CLA-organized picket lines to WPA- and WEP-backed creative writing workshops to FWP research offices. I work here to make that alphabet meaningful.

[18] The most sustained—and insightful—engagement with Le Sueur's work comes from Constance Coiner and Julia Mickenberg. See Constance Coiner, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Julia Mickenberg, "Writing the Midwest: Meridel Le Sueur and the Making of a Radical Regional Tradition," in *Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives on Women's Regional Writing*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness and Diana Royer (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 143-161. For other helpful readings of Le Sueur's work see Denning, *Cultural Front*, 200-229 and Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 17-62.

I. Crafting the Literary Left: American Writers' Congress, 1935

"The Writer as Technician"

Since the collapse of his short-lived dramatic career, culminating with the failure of *Airways, Inc.* in 1929, Dos Passos had periodically sought respite from New York's *sturm und drang* in the bright, Bacardi-tinted environs of Key West, still at that time an isolated enclave of artists, idlers, Portuguese fisherman, and Bahamian rum-runners. Wintering with his wife, Kate, at their bungalow at 1401 Pine Street—then the outskirts of Key West proper—Dos Passos would pass the days, as he wrote to Edmund Wilson, "licking my wounds, fishing, eating wild herons and turtle steak, drinking Spanish wine and Cuban rum and generally remaking the inner man."[19] It was Dos Passos, reportedly, who first informed Ernest Hemingway of the charm and restorative seclusion to be found in the removes of Key West, where, during the last week of April, 1935, the two writers enjoyed one another's company cruising the Dry Tortugas, fishing for tarpon in the Gulf Stream, and, by night, drinking in barroom shacks beneath the stars and coconut palms. That week, amid the pastel-colored cocktails that swim through his letters of this period, Dos Passos completed his essay "The Writer as Technician," mailing the typescript up the coast to be read into the record at the first annual American Writers' Congress, held April 26-28 at Mecca Temple near Central Park.

Organized by the League of American Writers, a Party front, the Congress was a who's who of literary leftists, among them Malcolm Cowley, James T. Farrell, Langston Hughes, and Meridel Le Sueur, who delivered a paper on a movement she called "proletarian regionalism," arguing that "nowhere in America are the ravages of *laissez faire* colonization so apparent as in the Middle

[19] John Dos Passos to Edmund Wilson, March 1929, in *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos*, ed. Townsend Ludington (New York: Gambit, 1973), 391.

West."[20] Originally wary about participating in the Congress, Dos Passos changed his mind after learning from Wilson of increasingly unmanageable rumors regarding his growing conservatism. "It is being rumored," Wilson wrote, "that you are 'rubbing your belly' and saying that 'the good old Republican Party is good enough for you.'"[21] In response, Dos Passos begrudgingly contributed to the Congress an essay on leftist aesthetics and the role of the artist in social crises. This was, after all, an era when rumor mattered, when writers constantly shifted allegiances among a range of acronymic organizations, and when an ill-advised comment at a cocktail party or a poorly placed editorial might lastingly damage one's chances for personal and professional success. Eager to remain publishable within a literary culture dominated by the U.S. Left, Dos Passos nonetheless used the occasion of the Congress to air his objections to the "middleclass communism of the literati," contributing what he described as "a little preachment about liberty of conscience […] that I hope will queer me with the world savers so thoroughly that they'll leave me alone for awhile."[22] "The Writer as Technician" arrived in New York too late, however, to be read into the record that weekend—unless, as still other rumors maintained, it was surreptitiously stashed away in Congress offices. In either case, this dead letter suggests the tenuous position Dos Passos already occupied with respect to the Left, a position adumbrated in an essay that served, essentially, as Dos Passos's coming-out as a literary independent, a "technician" as he put it, an ex-leftist at the age of 39.

For one of the central claims underlying Dos Passos's rhetorical figuration of the writer as technician was that his adherence to modernist aesthetic standards entailed the writer's disentangling himself from ulterior political commitments. The essay opened accordingly with Dos Passos's own self-emancipation. "A writer," he declared,

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[20] Meridel Le Sueur, "Proletarian Literature and the Middle West," in *American Writers' Congress*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 135.

[21] Quoted in Townsend Ludington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1980), 342.

[22] Ibid., 342.

> must never, I feel, no matter how much he is carried away by even the noblest political partisanship in the fight for social justice, allow himself to forget that his real political aim […] is liberty. A man can't discover anything, originate anything, invent anything unless he's at least morally free, without fear or preoccupation insofar as his work goes.[23]

Free to attend exclusively to the imperatives of his work, the literary artist sought to realize the formal ideal latent in his material, and did so, Dos Passos believed, through fastidious adherence to technical standards. The technician's state of mind, he argued, was a state of "selfless relaxation, with no worries or urges except those of the work at hand."[24] One of the reasons Dos Passos so cherished the isolation of Key West—instantiating geographically the intellectual remove he sought for his writing—was his ability to attune himself there strictly to the dictates of his material, to work, as he put it, "without tripping over that damn Party line."[25]

Privileging modernist technique over self-expression, Dos Passos's technician embodies that aspect of an American Arts and Crafts ideal which promoted technical standards like those enforced by pre-industrial guilds. Objecting to the inferior quality of mass-manufactured commodities, craft idealists cultivated, as the journal *Handicraft* described, "thorough technical training, and a just appreciation of standards," supporting "good and beautiful work" through the kind of juried exhibitions sponsored by the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston.[26] At such exhibitions, Beverly Brandt explains, craft critics "examined the basic design elements—shape, color, and texture—and their component parts, namely line or form; hue, value, and intensity; pattern and surface finish."[27] It is this emphasis on technical rigor that Dos Passos adapts in "The Writer as Technician," stressing "the need for clean truth and sharply whittled exactitudes"—"even if he's to be killed the next

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[23] Dos Passos, "Technician," 80.
[24] Ibid., 81.
[25] Quoted in Alfred Corn, "Hemingway & Co. in Key West," *New York Times*, November 20, 1988.
[26] Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston. *Handicraft* 1, no. 1 (April 1902), NP.
[27] Beverly K. Brandt, *The Craftsman and the Critic: Defining Usefulness and Beauty in Arts and Crafts-Era Boston* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 47.

minute," Dos Passos writes, "a man has to be cool and dispassionate while he's aiming his gun."[28] Decades later, Dos Passos would elaborate this Hemingway-esque metaphor for the impersonality of technique, contending in the *National Review*—indication of the trajectory his career would follow—that an "expert hunter […] forgets himself," letting "all his senses come awake to respond to the frailest intimations." Truly skilled marksmen, Dos Passos argues, "are able to forget who they are and become for the moment just an eye and ear and a gun."[29] Likewise, the Arts and Crafts practitioner submitted himself to the imperatives of clay, wood, metal, and textile, cultivating "precision" and "discrimination" in his labor—keywords that recur like totems throughout craft literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

For all his pretension to the disinterested realization of aesthetic form, however—represented in the reserve of the patrician hunter—Dos Passos's technician nonetheless retains a social function: to serve as part of an intellectual vanguard and, by properly calibrating American culture, to organize the attitudes and affects of the working class. The technician "molds and influences ways of thinking," Dos Passos writes, "to the point of changing and rebuilding the language, which is the mind of the group."[30] One of the contradictions inherent in Dos Passos's conception of literary craftsmanship is that the figuration of "writer as technician" names a double operation, signaling the writer's fastidious adherence to technical standards while also—somewhat paradoxically—pointing to his role as an engineer of American culture. "In his relation to society," Dos Passos writes, "a professional writer is a technician just as much as an electrical engineer is."[31] It is at this point in the essay—having invoked not only hunters and technicians, but scientists, engineers, inventors, day-laborers, and car mechanics—that Dos Passos's metaphors begin to indicate the challenge in

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[28] Dos Passos, "Technician," 82.

[29] John Dos Passos, "What Makes a Novelist," in *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose*, ed. Donald Pizer (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 273.

[30] Dos Passos, "Technician," 79.

[31] Ibid., 79.

adapting a wider contemporary fascination with "technocracy" to the theory and practice of literature. Popularized by sociologist Thorstein Veblen, "technocracy" itself was premised on the idea that the disinterested efficiency engineer, rather than the profit-driven business tycoon or nationalistic statesman, was best positioned to resolve increasingly complicated global problems like underproduction, inefficient distribution, and unemployment. "The material welfare of the community," Veblen wrote in *The Engineers and the Price System*, "is unreservedly bound up with the due working of this industrial system, and therefore with its unreserved control by the engineers, who alone are competent to manage it." Like Dos Passos's technician, Veblen's engineer attended exclusively to the dictates of his work "as it should be done," requiring "a free hand, unhampered by commercial considerations."[32] Dos Passos's technician, then, carries over into literary production the disinterest of Veblen's engineer, whose liberty allows the economic system, in this case, its fullest formal realization. Dos Passos's technician possesses something of a split consciousness, however, faithful to modernist technique while simultaneously engaged—precisely through this technique—in the re-engineering of culture writ large.

In his excellent study of Depression-era documentary, Jeff Allred situates Dos Passos's technician as part of what he calls a broader "cultural technics" of the 1930s, an extension "of the principle of engineering"—embodied in an emergent professional-managerial class—beyond "narrowly technological concerns to the social and cultural realms."[33] For Dos Passos, though—who knew, admired, and even plagiarized Veblen—the figure of the technician owed less to a vogue for technocracy than to his own longtime interest in craft.[34] Though "The Writer as Technician" has the force of a manifesto, and though it marked a dramatic turning point in Dos Passos's relationship

[32] Thorstein Veblen, *The Engineers and the Price System* (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1921), 69-70.
[33] Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 42.
[34] In his 1930 essay "Whom Can We Appeal To?," for instance, Dos Passos parrots Veblen's technocracy almost verbatim and without attribution. See John Dos Passos, "Whom Can We Appeal To?," in *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose*, ed. Donald Pizer (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 131-133.

with the Left, its "technician" constituted an evolution in the craft rhetoric that had animated some of Dos Passos's earliest writing. In a previous chapter, I show how Dos Passos allegorizes this evolution—from residual craftsmanship to emergent technocracy—in his 1929 play *Airways, Inc.* That same year, reviewing *A Farewell to Arms* in *New Masses*, Dos Passos praised the novel as a "firstrate piece of craftsmanship by a man who knows his job," comparing it to a "piece of wellfinished carpenters' work." Hemingway's prose style, moreover, struck Dos Passos as "terse and economical," with each phrase "bear[ing] its maximum load of meaning, sense impressions, emotion."[35] Metaphorizing the literary text as craft object—the joists of a Key West bungalow, perhaps—Dos Passos's descriptors suggest an even more uncompromising commitment to the writer's technical independence than he would come to advocate in "The Writer as Technician," where his technician works double-time as an engineer of culture. Despite his freedom from the Party, that is, Dos Passos's technician is far more socially engaged than the craftsman he alludes to in his review; what Dos Passos values in Hemingway is neither his "cultural technics," properly calibrating American working-class culture, nor the anticipatory imaging of social revolution—and certainly not the self-expression of some probing interiority turned outward—but his ability to "work ably with his material and his tools and continually push the work to the limit of that effort."[36] Such an evolution—from disinterested craftsmanship to the technician's modicum of social engagement—complicates the critical tendency to find in Dos Passos's career a clean trajectory from the idealistic leftism of New Playwrights Theatre to the conservatism of *National Review*; while many erstwhile leftists followed precisely this trajectory, Dos Passos's own career delineated a far more erratic arc.[37]

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[35] John Dos Passos, "A Farewell to Arms," in *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose*, ed. Donald Pizer (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 121.
[36] Ibid., 122.
[37] For a compelling account of how Dos Passos's increasing conservatism manifested his "melancholia" over the demise of the literary Left, see Seth Moglen, *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

Yet Dos Passos's review of *A Farewell to Arms* takes his commitment to literary craftsmanship one step further, finding in Hemingway's prose, a "hangover from the period of individual manufacture that is just closing," exactly that period that the American Arts and Crafts movement had tried to resuscitate. Advocating craftsmanship as "the privilege of any workman"—whether in "novelwriting, the painting of easelpictures, [or] the machinebuilding trades"—Dos Passos laments that "most of the attempts to salvage craftsmanship in industry have been faddy movements like East Aurora and Morris furniture and have come to nothing."[38] By 1929, when Dos Passos was writing, the journals *Handicraft* and *The Craftsman* had been defunct for over a decade. In 1915, the same year that craft furniture-maker Gustav Stickley declared bankruptcy, Roycroft founder Elbert Hubbard died in the sinking of the *Lusitania*. John Ruskin had been dead since 1900, William Morris since the last century, and the American movement that looked to their example had become, at the hands of the roaring twenties, an increasingly irrelevant and under-funded proposition. As major American Arts and Crafts initiatives died out, the movement fragmented into a series of cultural formations with varying degrees of allegiance to its craft ideal. While architects like Julia Morgan and Frank Lloyd Wright incorporated "craft," somewhat affectedly, as architectural style, other artists found in craft production a set of metaphors by which to re-articulate literary labor, whether, in Gold's case, as an expression of proletarian experience or—as with Dos Passos and *Partisan Review*—as adherence to technical standards. Dos Passos promoted precisely those standards in his review of *A Farewell to Arms*. *Partisan Review* editor Philip Rahv would promote them even more succinctly. "What is the artist actually doing in politics?" Rahv asked in a 1934 editorial. "How does his political faith affect him as a craftsman?"[39] For Rahv, Dos Passos, and their coterie, literary craftsmanship adapted from the American Arts and Crafts movement supplied the underlying logic for a literary "technocracy" they would promote throughout the 1930s.

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[38] Ibid., 122.
[39] Philip Rahv, "Twilight of the Thirtes," *Partisan Review* 6, no. 4 (Summer 1939), 8

Dos Passos's embrace of the technician was not, however, without profound regret for the evanescence of the craftsman, a figure Dos Passos memorialized in one after another of the "biographies" scattered throughout his *U.S.A.* While many critics, including Allred, have read the trilogy's quasi-documentary aesthetic as the kind of literary engineering that Dos Passos's technician might well produce, the novel's biographies sound a strikingly elegiac note for a waning era of craftsmanship. In his treatment of Henry Ford, Dos Passos parodies his own tendency toward portmanteau as an effect of the assembly line, describing "the Taylorized speedup everywhere […] adjustwasher, screwdown bolt, reachunderadjustwasherscrewdownreachunderadjust until every ounce of life was sucked off into production and at night the workmen went home grey shaking husks."[40] When Ford himself retires to Massachusetts, he attempts to undo these effects. "[H]e had the new highway where the newmodel cars roared and slithered and hissed oilily past (*the new noise of the automobile*), moved away from the door," Dos Passos writes, "put back the old bad road, so that everything might be the way it used to be, in the days of horses and buggies."[41] Dos Passos's portrait of Orville and Wilbur Wright, similarly, contrasts the industrialization of the airplane with nostalgia for the Wright brothers' workshop in Dayton:

> [N]ot even the headlines or the bitter smear of newsprint or the choke of smokescreen and gas or chatter of brokers on the stockmarket or barking of phantom millions or oratory of brasshats laying wreaths on new monuments can blur the memory of the chilly December day two shivering bicycle mechanics from Dayton, Ohio, first felt their homemade contraption whittled out of hickory sticks, gummed together with Arnstein's bicycle cement, stretched with muslin they'd sewn on their sister's sewingmachine in their own backyard on Hawthorn Street in Dayton, Ohio, soar into the air above the dunes and the wide beach at Kitty Hawk.[42]

The note of wistfulness is unmistakable, Dos Passos's prose moving across time and place to join craft labor, in a single finely-constructed sentence, to its own inevitable obsolescence.

Though Dos Passos's technician constituted a necessary makeover of the craftsman that

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[40] John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 812-813.
[41] Ibid., 814. [emphasis in original]
[42] Ibid., 1006.

embodied his earlier ideal of literary labor, Dos Passos would find himself literally and rhetorically *non grata* at the American Writers' Congress, where on opening night the editor of a magazine calling itself *Marine Workers' Voice* wondered aloud whether the intellectuals in attendance "want to starve today or not." "Because if they don't," Hays Jones declared, "they have got to do certain things, and that is to come down to the place where they have a market."[43] It is that market—with its fierce working-class militancy—to which I too now come down, outlining a second faction of the literary Left embodied in the figure of the self-expressive proletarian. Jones himself seemed perfectly to embody that figure, no more so than when he crowed that if "professional" writers like Dos Passos "don't take the invitation we'll give them an ultimatum. They can go on writing about the dead," Jones declared, "until finally we have to shove them into the grave and cover them up with the dirt."[44] These, in 1935, were the stakes.

"Jets of exasperated feeling": On Proletarianism

The long summer of 1934, witness to the great industrial strikes in Minneapolis, California, and Toledo, played witness too to a groundswell of young writers declaring themselves "proletarians" in the magazines of the literary Left, promoting themselves in a variety of cultural institutions that included writers workshops, lecture circuits, art exhibitions, dance troupes, and even parade committees. Influenced by the proletkult values of the Soviet Union's ultra-revolutionary "Third Period"—a six-year period from the crash of 1929 to the "Popular Front" of 1935—these young writers agitated militantly for economic revolution and for an accompanying shift in social and cultural values. Eager to prove their mettle as class warriors, proletarian artists descended en masse on the American Writers' Congress in April of 1935, as much of an in-scene for the literary Left as

[43] Quoted in Henry Hart, "Introduction," in *American Writers' Congress*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 15.
[44] Ibid., 16.

today's AWP conference remains for the MFA industry—and one which, given his allergy to *causes célèbres*, Dos Passos may have done well to avoid.

For among the papers delivered that weekend—Alexander Trachtenberg on the leftist publishing industry, Langston Hughes on black proletarianism—one common line of inquiry was the more or less explicit critique of Dos Passos's disinterested technician, a whipping boy of sorts by which proletarian writers demonstrated their commitment. In contrast to Dos Passos's view that the writer should preserve his autonomy, French poet Louis Aragon celebrated "the chain" that bound him to the working class and which "hired philosophers had taught [him] to deny."[45] While Dos Passos viewed intellectual liberty as a precondition of the writer's ability to "discover anything, originate anything, invent anything,"[46] novelist and recently minted Guggenheim Fellow Jack Conroy decried a "desperate striving for novelty of phrase and imagery" that ended, Conroy believed, in a "semi-private terminology almost unintelligible to the masses." The worker-writer, Conroy went on—a clear jab at Dos Passos's portmanteau—"must learn to express himself as clearly and as simply as he can," but in so doing he "will not find it necessary to concoct weird hybrids of words or to coin new words."[47] Most prominent among Dos Passos's detractors, Kenneth Burke rebuked those who would "profit by the prestige which the technological expert enjoys in the contemporary framework of values," castigating Dos Passos, without naming him, for "polarizing allegiance around the symbol of the engineer."[48] Even Le Sueur, whose talk on proletarian regionalism hewed closely to her experience in the Midwest, stressed that "the emphasis must not be simply on skill and

[45] Louis Aragon, "From Dada to Red Front," in *American Writers' Congress*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 34.

[46] Dos Passos, "Technician," 80.

[47] Jack Conroy, "The Worker as Writer," in *American Writers' Congress*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 83.

[48] Kenneth Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," in *American Writers' Congress*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 88. For more elaborate treatment of Burke's response to Dos Passos, see Allred, *American Modernism*, 29-42.

technique, but on a new experience, a communal relationship and revolutionary ideology."[49]

Given such opprobrium, it is hardly surprising that Dos Passos elected the boozy isolation of Key West over the certain confrontation awaiting him in Midtown; his "morally free" technician, the Congress demonstrated, had become increasingly irreconcilable with the committed proletarian writer, a figure leftist literary impresario Mike Gold had conceived six years earlier. Writing in *New Masses*, Gold described a "wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working-class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines, steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America." Gold's self-expressive proletarian "writes in jets of exasperated feeling and has no time to polish his work;" rather, he "knows it in the same way that one of Professor Baker's students knows the six different ways of ending a first act."[50] Grown by 1935 to a national phenomenon, Gold's proletarian writer was present not only in person at the American Writers' Congress—thousands-strong, in fact, from 26 states and four foreign countries—but made cameo appearances in many of the lectures delivered that weekend. Le Sueur, for instance, would echo Gold explicitly in describing a regionalist movement organized around the "growing yeast of the revolutionary working class arising on the Mesabi range, the wheat belt, the coal fields of Illinois."[51] Despite Gold's invocation of Baker, his proletarian marks a clear departure from the craft of the 47 Workshop, with Gold de-emphasizing technical standards in order to privilege the almost literal expression of the worker's experience. While both aspects of the craft ideal were mobilized in Baker's well-crafted dramatic productions—and in the American Arts and Crafts movement of which the 47 Workshop was part—Gold's expressivist rhetoric adapted that aspect of craft that prioritized "native or vernacular expression," as one nineteenth-century craft critic put it, over fastidious technique.[52] Stressing the craft object's origin in working-class experience, craft adherents turned frequently to

[49] Le Sueur, "Proletarian," 137.
[50] Gold, "Go Left," 4.
[51] Le Sueur, "Proletarian," 136.
[52] Quoted in Brandt, "The Craftsman," 54.

linguistic metaphors as a means of articulating their belief in expressive labor. "They advised their constituents," Brandt writes, "against producing objects 'having nothing meaningful to say,' or that made statements which might be denounced as elaborate, affected, pretentious, artificial, or strained (all their words)."[53] Under Gold's editorship, *New Masses* became a forum for showcasing expressions of working-class life otherwise neglected by mainstream publishing outlets, with Gold actively soliciting workers' editorial input and maintaining a series of "Worker's Correspondence" poems that combined multiple letters to the editor and other not-quite-publishable material.

For Gold, all of these endeavors entailed a reorientation of literary standards toward the language and experience of the working class, a "proletarian realism," as he termed it, that dealt with the "*real conflicts* of men and women who work for a living."[54] "Write," Gold encouraged the audience of *New Masses*. "Your life in mine, mill, and farm is of deathless significance in the history of the world. […] It may be literature—it often is."[55] Rejecting "scholastic jargon" that "no American could understand without a year or two of post-graduate study,"[56] Gold's commitment to proletarianism frequently manifested as class contempt for Dos Passos and other intelllectuals associated with *Partisan Review*, a coterie Gold derided as a "little group of Phi Beta Kappa Trotskyites in New York." This rhetoric would become more vituperative over time, with Gold arguing at the height of the Moscow trials that "it is easy to criticize Soviet Russia in a steam-heated New York restaurant, before a group of book reviewers and college instructors who've never shot a White Guard *saboteur* in their lives."[57] Underlying Gold's ad hominem invective was a critique of literary modernism as "bourgeois" experimentation sealed off from social and political engagement, an "art for art's sake" aestheticism divorced from the everyday lives of workers. Modernism, Gold argued, constituted the

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[53] Ibid,. 54.
[54] Mike Gold, "Notes of the Month," *New Masses* 6, no. 4 (September 1930), 5.
[55] Gold, "Go Left," 4.
[56] Mike Gold, "Papa Partisan and Mother Anvil," *New Masses* 18, no. 8 (February 18, 1936), 22.
[57] Mike Gold, "Migratory Intellectuals," *New Masses* 21, no. 12 (December 15, 1936), 27.

cultural epiphenomenon of a maladjusted leisure class "which has no function to perform in society except the clipping of investment coupons," and which therefore "develops ills and neuroses" causing its sufferers to "seek new sensations, new adventures constantly in order to give themselves feelings." Pathologizing modernism, Gold traced the movement to the spiritual lassitude of neurasthenic elites. "Their life is stale to them," he wrote. "Tasteless, inane, because it has no meaning."[58] Less critically nuanced than rhetorically forceful, the proletarian objection to modernism tended to center on a handful of influential high modernists, among them *bêtes noires* Gertrude Stein—a "literary idiot," Gold said[59]—T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust, who represented "the worst example and the best of what we do not want," a "master-masturbator of the bourgeois literature."[60] In contrast, Phillips and Rahv held it a mistake "to assume that [Proust's] values are the values of bourgeois ideology," since his novels exhibited "many insights into bourgeois social relations that are far removed from the way the normal bourgeois sees them."[61] Was not Eliot's "autumnal sensibility," Phillips asked, "a kind of comment on the state of society?"[62] Didn't Rimbaud's poetry "stand up off the page?" Dos Passos implored.[63]

These schisms—between modernists and antimodernists, mental and manual laborers—manifested in a variety of forms, with varying degrees of intensity, across the literary Left of the 1930s, but they also curiously replay similar debates that had wracked the American Arts and Crafts movement in the early twentieth century. Unfolding in the journal *Handicraft*, organ of the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston, those earlier debates had centered in large part on the relationship between craft movement leaders and craft workers, the former consisting of wealthier intellectuals, like Harvard professor Charles Eliot Norton, who provided the movement's theoretical framework

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[58] Mike Gold, "Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot," in *Change the World* (New York: Intellectual Publishers, 1936), 25.
[59] Ibid., 23.
[60] Gold, "Notes," 5.
[61] Wallace Phelps and Philip Rahv, "Criticism," *Partisan Review* 2, no. 7 (April-May 1935), 20.
[62] William Phillips, "The Aesthetic of the Founding Fathers," *Partisan Review* 4, no. 4 (March 1938), 19.
[63] Dos Passos, "Novelist," 272.

and financial backing. While Norton and others viewed aesthetically savvy, well-connected intellectuals as an elite avant garde justly tasked with shaping the values and vision of American Arts and Crafts, another faction of the craft movement militantly promoted socio-economic reorganization as integral to craft's continued viability, advocating for everyday craftsmen to assume positions of social authority and economic security. The painter and Harvard professor Denman Ross suggested the tone of these debates in a 1903 editorial, contending that "knowledge of art, which means aesthetic discrimination and judgment, is found, generally, among the people who do no work, people who study works of art, collect them, and talk about them, but produce nothing." In contrast, "the people […] who are able to work and do work, have, as a rule, no discrimination, no judgment, no standards."[64] Emphasizing technical standards and fidelity to the work of art itself, Ross's position anticipates that of Dos Passos thirty years later, while Mary Ware Dennett—a women's rights activist prominent in SACB circles—foreshadowed the simple, forceful invective of Gold when she declared that "there is the lover of art on one side of the field, the lover of humanity on the other."[65] Neither faction proved long for the world, but the vitality of the debate—raging for months across the pages of *Handicraft* and other forums—indicates the seriousness with which craft ideologues viewed the movement's potential.

Likewise, the scope and vitality of the conversations at the American Writers' Congress suggested a proletarian movement in the heyday of its influence, one that had dominated the literary Left in the years following the crash and which seemed poised, riding a groundswell of working-class support, to revolutionize American culture and politics. In fact, Gold's proletarianism proved a relatively short-lived affair, supplanted mere months after the Congress by a shift in Soviet cultural policy toward the broad, cross-class alliance of the "Popular Front." Despite its relatively brief tenure, however—and despite Gold's vitriol for high moderns like Proust—proletarianism

[64] Ross, "Arts," 232.
[65] Mary Ware Dennett, "Aesthetics and Ethics," *Handicraft* 1, no. 11 (May 1902), 29.

constituted a vital movement *within* modernist ideology. More than simply "the project of 'making it new,'" as Foley holds, proletarianism shared with modernism a cluster of interrelated values like forcefulness, simplicity, spontaneity, expressiveness, and masculinity—this last, sometimes, to the point of misogyny—while also influencing quintessential modernists like the William Carlos Williams of *Paterson*. After three days of talks on everything from "social trends in modern drama" to "the writer in a minority language," novelist James T. Farrell, fresh off the critical success of his *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, rose to propose that the Congress conclude with a communal rendition of the *Internationale*. It was a fitting end to what must have seemed a glorious weekend of proletarian fervor, and it was an act that would have sickened Dos Passos: thousands of literary "proletarians"—free enough from work to spend the weekend in Midtown—singing their allegiance in lyrics imported from the Commune by way of Moscow. Nonetheless, and as Henry Hart reported in the minutes of the Congress—"this was done."[66]

Reprogramming

Outlining aesthetic debates internal to the 1930s Left matters not only because those debates fenced out the discursive field within which writers like Le Sueur operated, but because they also shaped many of the values institutionalized in mid-century creative writing workshops organized around ideas of literary craftsmanship.

Examining the rise and proliferation of those workshops, McGurl has argued compellingly that the idea of "self-expression" therein is "rotated to the minor position in relation to the more widely touted cluster of values that include impersonality, technique, and self-discipline."[67] In postwar workshops, creative writing craft provides the pedagogical "adjustment" which, by disciplining the

[66] Henry Hart, "Discussion and Proceedings," in *American Writers' Congress*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 192.
[67] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 147.

writer's expressive ego, facilitates the promotion of what McGurl variously calls "the classically modernist value of impersonality," "Eliotic impersonality," and the "New Critical idea of narrative impersonality."[68] The quintessential texts of the "Program Era," therefore, become the terse post-Hemingway short story as embodied in Flannery O'Connor and—though McGurl does not discuss poetry—the "well-wrought" lyric, a formal construct mirroring reality rather than, as Cleanth Brooks says, "any mere statement about experience."[69] As I've suggested, however, the mobilization of craft rhetoric in the service of modernist technique was hardly endemic to New Critical workshops nor an exclusive feature of the Program Era; rather, such practices characterized one faction of the 1930s literary Left which found in craft, as Dos Passos had, a way to foster that "state of selfless relaxation" wherein the writer knows "no worries or urges except those of the work at hand."[70] Moreover, in reading postwar writing pedagogy like "show don't tell" as promoting a New Critical resistance to didacticism—and, in so doing, suppressing more expressive identity-driven and political writing—scholars of creative writing miss how didactic poetics were in fact rebuked not just by Dos Passos and his partisans but by a range of leftist writers who otherwise took diverse positions with respect to the Party program. Despite their differences, both Gold and Dos Passos understood authentic working-class writing—whether "proletarian realism" or the "technical possibilities" of modernism—as a corrective to the didacticism promulgated by the Communist Party. There was "widespread agreement among 1930s Marxists," Foley writes, "that explicit didacticism was undesirable," quoting Gold's remark that "the function of a revolutionary writer is not to suggest political platforms and theses, but to portray the life of the workers and to inspire them with solidarity and revolt."[71]

While my reconstruction of 1930s cultural debates questions McGurl's characterization of the

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[68] Ibid., 23, 78, 230.
[69] Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1970), 213.
[70] Dos Passos, "Technician," 81.
[71] Quoted in Foley, *Radical*, 138.

Program Era as uniquely craft-conscious, I also question Foley's tendency to overplay the role of New Critical poetics in suppressing proletarian writing. Faulting New Critical values like ambiguity, irony, and paradox for their exclusiveness and elitism, Foley and many other scholars re-encode precisely those values in ostensibly "recovered" texts. Of proletarian fiction, for instance, Foley writes that "expressions of political doctrine would be woven, blended, or otherwise embedded in the narrative," her own craft rhetoric framing didacticism as simply another rhetorical thread in the richly ambivalent tapestry of the proletarian text.[72] Similarly, where Brooks and Robert Penn Warren describe poetry as treating "the massiveness, the *multidimensional quality*, of experience,"[73] Foley finds proletarian literature manifesting its partisanship through "its dialectic grasp of the text's historical referent." "Truth to the object," Foley writes, "rather than arousal of the reader, constituted the principal determinant of value in a proletarian text."[74] In rescuing literary proletarians from charges of didacticism, Foley ironically reinscribes in writers like Gold precisely those "New Critical" values she castigates as licensing a "political witch hunt in the realm of literary and cultural history."[75] Foley's, however, are hardly the unequivocal binaries of a "witch hunt."

Nor do standard narratives regarding the relationship between New Critical poetics and the 1930s maintain the crisp, uncomplicated binaries they tend to invoke. Excoriating New Critical pretension to an ahistorical aestheticism, Cary Nelson nonetheless celebrates 1930s "political poetry that was experimental, rhetorically complex, and explicitly modernist."[76] In his analysis of Mike Gold's work, James Bloom finds proletarian texts characterized by "the density, the generic ambiguity, and the understanding of their own production [...] that make the most memorable

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[72] Ibid., 277.
[73] Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1950), 6. [emphasis in original]
[74] Foley, *Radical*, 155.
[75] Ibid., 167.
[76] Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 234.

writing of the past century and a half 'modernist.'"[77] Examining representations of working-class experience in modernist poetry, John Marsh argues that "for the New Critics, poets entered the canon on the condition that they wrote poetry and not 'propaganda,'" faulting the New Criticism, in his terms, for "everything else that scholars regret about the discipline" before devoting the entirety of his study to the rhetorical complexity of writers like Langston Hughes and Carl Sandburg.[78] In their own reconstructions of literary history, these scholars exempt proletarian writing from the recriminations they lay at the feet not only of the New Critics but of a *Partisan Review* coterie whose emphasis on technique provides the foundation, such scholars argue, for later New Critical aestheticism. Writers like Dos Passos, Foley contends, formed an "interlocking directorate" with the New Criticism, rationalizing through craft rhetoric "a conservative and exclusionary conception of literary value."[79] Their "critical preoccupation with the ironies and tensions in modernist literature" made *Partisan Review* a "strange cousin," Alan Wald argues, to later theorists of ambiguity like Brooks and Warren.[80] Themselves possessed with an air of the "witch hunt," these histories fault literary craftsmanship—particularly as represented in Dos Passos and *Partisan Review*—for suppressing proletarian writing that might have, as it seemed for one glorious conference in the spring of 1935, opened the way toward a revolutionary future.

I am less interested in entertaining a morality tale about Cleanth Brooks than in showing how 1930s cultural debates—a lacuna in McGurl's otherwise remarkable project—supplied the terminology and ideological positioning for later workshops operating on "New Critical" principles. The question of how to reconcile political commitment with literary craftsmanship, of course, would be posed and reposed throughout the twentieth century, just as it had been posed countless times

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[77] James Bloom, *Left Letters: The Culture Wars of Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 6-7.

[78] John Marsh, *Hog Butchers, Beggars, and Busboys: Poverty, Labor, and the Making of American Poetry* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 21-22.

[79] Foley, *Radical*, 3, 6.

[80] Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 219.

before—from Horace to Edward Young, from Plato's banished poet to Shelley's unacknowledged legislator—when the relationship between technique and expression had been brought to a crisis. The 1930s constituted one such crisis, and while Gold and Dos Passos took up opposed barricades within that crisis in doing so they opened a discursive field in which a range of leftist writers could stake out their own positions. As I show in what follows, Le Sueur was one of the most significant writers to do so.

II. "A vast university of the common people": Meridel Le Sueur and the WPA

Worker Writers

Alongside her work in the Women's Auxiliary of General Drivers' Local 574, Meridel Le Sueur endeavored to promote working-class consciousness at the WPA-backed Minnesota Labor School in Minneapolis, where throughout the mid- to late-thirties she taught creative writing as part of the New Deal's Worker's Education Project (WEP). While WEP objectives were manifold, ranging widely in terms of audience, ambition, and administration, Le Sueur's own pedagogical aims were relatively straightforward—namely, to equip workers with the linguistic "tools" necessary to reflect critically on their experiences as workers.

Toward that end, Le Sueur's pedagogy framed creative writing as practical labor, work her students might learn just as readily as they "learn carpentry, just like you learn to make a table or chair." Language, Le Sueur wrote, "like the plow, the chisel, the needle, the spindle, is a tool. Everyone must make this tool his or her own."[81] Le Sueur's democratization of literary culture manifested also as a critique of the exclusionary institution of the university; she encouraged her students "not [to] be afraid to write simply because you are not a University student or quit school

[81] Meridel Le Sueur, *Worker Writers* (Minneapolis: West End Press, 1982), §2.

when you were ten."[82] Relatedly, Le Sueur followed Gold in objecting to the kind of decadent modernist literature such universities promoted, deriding Proust, in a textbook she produced for her courses, as a "sick nobleman who shut himself up in a cork room to remember […] the fetid decay of his life." Le Sueur convicts Gertrude Stein, likewise—"with her 'Pigeons on the grass, alas'"—of writing only "for a select few," restricting "the word as a tool" for the exclusive use of the elite.[83] One of many cultural formations informed by 1930s proletarianism, Le Sueur's workshops extended Gold's critique of what Le Sueur herself, at the American Writers' Congress, called *Partisan Review*'s "intellectual, inhuman, non-human" brand of Marxism; what mattered for Le Sueur was less the virtuosic craftsmanship of intellectuals like Dos Passos than writing which came "straight from the [worker's] experience […] for other workers to understand."[84]

These values are outlined in Le Sueur's creative writing textbook, *Worker Writers*, a slim volume she printed and distributed to her students at no charge. Organized into five sections with titles that indicate its tone of proletarian uplift—"The Word is a Tool," "We Must Have Writers"—the textbook reinforces Le Sueur's pedagogical figuration of writing as practical labor, metaphorizing narrative structure, for example, as a process that "can be learned only by wrestling" with the writer's raw material, "trying it" as if it were mortar, until the entire structure "hold[s] and satisfy[ies]."[85] Appended to these five sections as a kind of pedagogical exemplum, Le Sueur offers a critical reading of one of her own short stories, "Biography of My Daughter," which turns out neatly to allegorize Le Sueur's proletarian values. In a column of marginal comments running parallel to the text proper, she identifies key moments in the story's formal development, noting at the conclusion of the story's opening movement, for instance, that "now we have prepared completely

[82] Ibid., §2.
[83] Ibid., §2.
[84] Quoted in Linda Ray Pratt, "Woman Writer in the Communist Party: The Case of Meridel Le Sueur," *Women's Studies* 14 (1998), 252. Le Sueur, *Worker Writers*, §2.
[85] Ibid., §4.

for the narrative problem, 'Why did Rhoda die?'"[86]

To understand that question, and to grasp how Le Sueur hard-wires political commitment into creative writing pedagogy, we should understand something of Rhoda's story. Originally published in 1935 in H. L. Mencken's *The American Mercury*, "Biography of My Daughter" picks up Rhoda's narrative in the months after her college graduation, following her through several menial jobs—cooking and housekeeping for a local family, night-waitressing at a dive called "Coffee Dan's"—before she finds work as a librarian under the Civil Works Administration, a New Deal initiative intended to create temporary jobs in the winter of 1933-34. When federal funding for her position runs out after two weeks, Rhoda finds herself unemployed and eking out a starvation-level existence, wandering from breadlines to flop-houses until, near madness, she is brought to a sanitarium by her college friend, Marie. It is at the gates of that sanitarium, Rhoda and Marie "stopping at the door at the smell of death," that Le Sueur indicates the "END OF BEGINNING," noting in the story's margins that the narrative problem—"Why did Rhoda die?"—has now been established.[87] The moment is a pivotal one, positioning Rhoda between two institutions—university and sanitarium—equally "inhuman" in Le Sueur's treatment of them, equally inattentive, that is, to the imperatives of working-class experience. While it is "the university doctor himself" who, treating Rhoda at the sanitarium, ultimately contributes to her death from "complications," Le Sueur indicts Rhoda's college education, too, as a kind of cultural malpractice, a haute aestheticism fatally severed from workers' day-to-day reality. "'Listen,'" Marie says to Rhoda's mother in the foyer of the sanitarium.

> When she was graduated from the university I went to see her. There we sat and Coffman, the president, said we mustn't pay any attention he said to this shifting world, that's what he said. It's abstract science, that's what it is, go to the classics, he said, go to the good sane things of our forefathers. Listen […] she died of starvation.[88]

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[86] Meridel Le Sueur, "Biography of My Daughter," in *Worker Writers* (Minneapolis: West End Press, 1982), NP.
[87] Le Sueur, "Biography," NP.
[88] Ibid., NP.

The answer to the "narrative problem" of "Biography of My Daughter," then—that Rhoda died because her education denied her the proper "tools" for living—images in fictional form a critique of intellectualism that Le Sueur makes explicit in *Worker Writers* proper, where she contends that "the Universities have put a kind of halo around the written word as if it were sacred and not for common use."[89] Le Sueur's marginal exegesis of her own story, moreover, demonstrates how her creative writing pedagogy soldered leftist critique to questions of aesthetic form. "Show the theme clearly," she admonishes her students in one marginal note. "What happened to [Rhoda] must stop happening."[90] Like Gold, Le Sueur privileges implicit political suggestion over didactic commentary, reminding her students of the "secret" of effective writing—"don't tell about [a story's] conflict," she urges in *Worker Writers*, "SHOW it actually happening. […] We should feel as if we had actually taken part in the conflict."[91] Curiously, in a proletarian workshop of 1935, of all places, we find the same creative writing pedagogy scholars have attributed to the "New Critical idea of narrative impersonality."[92] While Foley and McGurl read the " heresy of the didactic"—a phrase original to Poe—as naming the restraint of the expressive ego through "New Critical" craft, Le Sueur herself follows Gold in prohibiting didacticism because it impedes the realistic portrayal of workers' experiences, hardly a concern paramount to Brooks, Warren, and the movement they inspired.

"A proletarian public sphere": The Workers' Education Project

If influenced by Gold's proletarianism, Le Sueur's pedagogy was shaped equally by the institutional context in which it took place, a "Workers' Education Project," so called, bankrolled by

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[89] Le Sueur, *Worker Writers*, §2.
[90] Le Sueur, "Biography," NP.
[91] Le Sueur, *Worker Writers*, §4.
[92] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 230.

the WPA from 1933 to 1942 and reaching over 60,000 students in roughly two dozen states.[93] Le Sueur's workshop-style classroom, to cite one example of WEP influence—in which students and teacher collaboratively produced, critiqued, and revised work, sharing experiences and intellectual resources—arose not as some default creative writing pedagogy but out of consciously deliberated WEP protocols, guidelines which encouraged discussion-based classrooms in which teachers acted as dialogic partners rather than authoritative reserves of knowledge. Thus, both in its content and form Le Sueur's pedagogy promoted cultural egalitarianism. As with her refashioning of proletarian ideology, however, Le Sueur worked within the institutional parameters of the WEP while revising them to accord with her own theories of working-class education; both sets of values, I argue, helped determine the paradigm within which the postwar MFA workshop would take shape.

The sole American effort to educate workers on such a massive scale, the Workers' Education Project employed in the heyday of its influence over 1,000 out-of-work teachers in subjects ranging from economics and labor history to parliamentary procedure, public speaking, and, as in Le Sueur's case, creative writing.[94] In accordance with WEP protocol, unions and other community groups could request classes through a government sponsor—typically a state university or department of education—though funds were also distributed to pre-existing institutions like the Minnesota Labor School. Teachers themselves were hired, as Le Sueur was, from community relief rolls and completed a teacher-training program before taking charge of their own classrooms.[95] It is appropriate, perhaps, that a writer who so derided the American university as an exclusionary institution found work instead in "a vast university of the common people,"[96] as Le Sueur would later put it, a network of night schools, extension courses, labor colleges, summer camps, and union

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[93] Accounts of the actual demographic reach of the WEP vary. See Denning, *Cultural Front*, 69-73 and Joyce L. Kornbluh, *A New Deal for Workers' Education* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 4-5.

[94] For more on WEP course offerings, see Denning, *Cultural Front*, 69; Kornbluh, *New Deal*, 5; and Caroline F. Ware, *Labor Education in Universities* (New York: American Labor Education Service, Inc., 1946), 5.

[95] For broader discussion of the practical procedures involved in administering the WEP, see Kornbluh, *New Deal*, 3-5 and Ware, *Labor Education*, 5.

[96] Meridel Le Sueur, *North Star Country* (New York: Book Find Club, 1945), 219.

meetings that dramatically reshaped higher education in this country, to the point, as Denning writes, that there emerged in WEP courses "an alternative intellectual world in the United States, a proletarian public sphere."[97] Intended by the Roosevelt administration as a means of critically engaging laborers in their work—educating them in collective bargaining, salutary workplace conditions, and other labor causes—WEP courses juggled multiple and sometimes contradictory objectives, all of which stemmed from the WEP's primary mission of increasing workers' economic, social, and political literacy. In addition to extending the liberal education of workers whose schooling was cut short by the Depression, the WEP endeavored to provide vocational training and labor rights counseling, to enrich workers' leisure time, to strengthen home lives, and to train prospective citizens in American history and culture.

As Joyce Kornbluh and Caroline Ware note, WEP objectives drew heavily on the agenda of early twentieth-century progressive educators, yoking citizenship and social engineering goals to liberal education focused on self-improvement and cultural uplift.[98] Such an agenda found its classic and most influential articulation in John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, in which the icon of progressive education recognized that a "great majority of workers have no insight into the social aims of their pursuits and no direct personal interest in them," and advocated an education that would uncover the "intellectual content" and "cultural possibilities" in industrial labor and "give those who engage in industrial callings desire and ability to share in social control."[99] Importantly—and seldom remarked-on in the extensive scholarship on his work—Dewey understood workers' education as a surrogate for the craft epistemologies produced and disseminated in the workshops of the nineteenth century. In such workshops, Dewey argued, workers' knowledge and ingenuity were honed through their direct manipulation of tools at their command. Though Dewey believed

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[97] Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 73.
[98] See especially Kornbluh, *New Deal*, 12-16 and Ware, *Labor Education*, 5.
[99] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1916), 249, 302, 307.

that the "intellectual *possibilities*" of industrial labor were greater than those of craftsmanship—with workers' labor reaching out, tentacle-like, to the iron mines of Alabama and the patent offices of Washington—the actual conditions of industrial work precluded full realization of its educational potential. "Industrial unions have infinitely greater intellectual content and infinitely larger cultural possibilities than they used to possess," Dewey wrote. Yet unless workers could "saturate with meaning the technical and mechanical features" of their work, they would "sink to the role of appendages to the machines they operate."[100] Thus, the task of educating the worker in the broader ramifications of his work fell to progressive educators, to programs like the WEP and to teachers like Le Sueur. Though the WEP's workshop-style classroom originated in Washington, then, this format signaled the role of workers' education as a replacement for the nineteenth-century workshop, where masters and apprentices labored collectively, with communal tools, at shared projects they oversaw from beginning to end. As an industrial-corporate regime entrenched itself at the core of the American economy, the workshop became "workshop."

Indeed, its translation of the craft workshop into an industrial context would contribute to the most formidable difficulty and greatest controversy the WEP faced in implementing its progressive ideals. As the CIO and other industrial labor organizations requested an increasing number of WEP classes—with some unions even developing their own educational initiatives—more conservative craft unionists associated with the AFL objected to what they perceived as the promotion with government funding of revolutionary rather than reformist values. As Kornbluh notes, while AFL educational efforts focused on fostering a "craft culture" among skilled laborers—respect for technical standards, brotherhood with one's fellow workers—industrial unions advocated more radical economic reorganization, promoted racial solidarity among black and immigrant workers, and advocated stridently for gains among women workers, causes that threatened not only the

[100] Ibid., 302, 307.

appeal and viability of craft unionism, but also, according to craft unionists, destabilized the very foundation of liberal democracy.[101] One need only glance at Le Sueur's own textbook to understand the merit in these charges. "We have to find out how to look at society," she wrote, "as being transformed by [its] dialectical opposite," describing an "inevitable movement into the synthesis, the movement and solidarity of all life."[102] "We need words," she argued, "to write the true history of the past so that we can create a true history in the future."[103] Le Sueur's rhetoric is far indeed from the business unionism of an AFL focused on the orderly maintenance of collective bargaining within existing economic structures. The evolving conflict between craft and industrial unionism, this is to say—so volatile during the long strike-filled summer of 1934—found expression too in New Deal undertakings like the WEP, initiatives which tended to aggravate more than ameliorate existing tensions over the meaning and ramifications of labor.

Yet the WEP's implementation of workers' education faced not only ideological but practical challenges as well, among them developing pedagogies flexible enough to educate a heterogeneous student population and retaining qualified teachers who were expected, like today's precariat of adjuncts, to demonstrate "absolute destitution" as a condition of employment. Le Sueur describes her own firsthand experience of WEP hiring practices in her essay "Women are Hungry," originally published in *The American Mercury* in 1934. "[Y]ou feel very terrible going up to the capitol office building," she writes, her second-person maintaining a kind of psychic distance. "You've gone up there lots of times to get a position but that is different. Then you had your Ph.D. and your fur coat and the knowledge that you were going to get on in that world, and you didn't have to watch to see that your elbows did not come through and that your last pair of stockings did not spring into a

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101 For broader discussion of the WEP controversy between the AFL and CIO see especially Kornbluh, *New Deal*, 54-56 and Melvin Dubosky and Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America: A History* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2004), 250-285.

102 Le Sueur, *Worker Writers*, §5.

103 Ibid., §1.

run." Contrasting the New Deal's high-flown symbolism with the realities of working-class life, Le Sueur describes "the great building with the chariot of horses high above," an edifice which now "looks terrifying and you feel guilty, as if you had failed somehow and it must be your own fault."[104] The statehouse chariot, equally democratic ideal and autocratic scourge, is in turn embodied in the hiring supervisor whom Le Sueur watches interrogate another prospective teacher, their tense exchange staging the kind of authoritative relationship Le Sueur worked to circumvent in her pedagogy. "The man was going over her application, trying to make it more definite," Le Sueur writes. "'You see, to get this, you have to prove absolute destitution,'" the supervisor explains. "'[Y]ou say you had fifty dollars left from your savings in the spring. Have you still got that? [...] How have you been living?'"[105] It is testament to the teachers who endured such interviews, and to the strength of the progressive ideal for which they did so, that the WEP grew to become the force it did, reaching across two dozen states and nearly a decade to educate vast segments of the American working class.

Increasingly imperiled as the nation's Depression-era progressivism shaded to wartime nationalism, the WEP faced ever more withering attacks from right-wing politicians eager to dismantle New Deal programming, the rhetoric in many of these attacks supplied by the AFL's own charges of radicalism within WEP classrooms.[106] While the WEP witnessed nothing like the Dies Committee attacks on the contemporaneous Federal Writers' Project, its initiatives were gradually phased out to make room for cultural and material mobilization for World War II. The legacy of the WEP would endure, however, in the increasing prominence of labor education in American colleges and universities, institutions which had begun to recognize the importance of labor in the healthy functioning of the state and which—perhaps more to the point—eagerly welcomed working-class

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104 Meridel Le Sueur, "Women are Hungry," in *Ripenings: Selected Work*, ed. Elaine Hedges (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), 152.
105 Ibid., 153-154.
106 For more on the right-wing assault on WEP initiatives see Kornbluh, *New Deal*, 100-102.

students as tuition-paying customers.[107] Much of the pedagogy developed under the auspices of the WEP, moreover, including Le Sueur's, would reemerge as a "pedagogy of the oppressed" during the New Left of the 1960s and 70s, rearticulated—an almost literal return of the repressed—as a combination of progressive education and liberation theology.[108]

Refiguring writing as practical labor rather than cultural capital—the kind of capital that contributes to Rhoda's death—Le Sueur's proletarianism, like Gold's, adapts the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century emphasis on the craft worker's expressive labor, part of a prior craft ideal that cleaves, as I've shown, into opposing factions of the 1930s Left. In what follows, I complicate this reading of Le Sueur's pedagogical and literary investments, since, as the "certain rules of construction" in *Worker Writers* suggest, hers was no unthinking expressivist ethos.[109] Rather, underlying Le Sueur's advocacy of proletarian writing was a sophisticated theory of language as "the 'action' of the creative worker," a kind of performative utterance *avant la lettre* which imagined and labored into existence more just modes of being.[110] Nor, finally, did Le Sueur's pedagogy owe entirely to the immediate context of the 1930s or the imperatives of the WEP—as is appropriate for a writer who so capitalized on puns on "labor," she was born for it.

"The 'action' of the creative worker"

Daughter of radical parents active in the turn-of-the-century socialist movement, Le Sueur grew up in a greenhouse of leftist culture, her father, Arthur, elected four times on the socialist ticket as mayor of Minot, North Dakota, and her mother, Marian Wharton, a close associate of Helen Keller in the temperance and suffrage movements. In addition to their more overt activism with the IWW

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[107] Ware's study, in fact, is an expert analysis of the incorporation of WEP programming into conventional American higher education. See especially Ware, *Labor Education*, 8-131.

[108] For the classic articulation of New Left pedagogy, see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

[109] Le Sueur, *Worker Writers*, §1.

[110] Meridel Le Sueur, "The Fetish of Being Outside," *New Masses* 14, no. 9 (February 26, 1935), 22.

and other socialist organizations, Le Sueur's parents were among the leaders of the socialist-inspired People's College in Fort Scott, Kansas, where from 1914 to 1917 Arthur served as college president alongside Chancellor Eugene Debs and Marian administered the college's Publicity Department, teaching part-time in the school's "Department of Plain English." Housed in a mansion near the town square, the People's College centered around a three-year course of study in U.S. law, but also offered residential and correspondence courses in a range of subjects, from English and algebra to typewriting, public speaking, and shorthand. As in Le Sueur's workshops, leftist critique came hard-wired into People's College pedagogy, no more so than in the textbook Wharton herself authored for use in the college's English courses.[111]

Titled *Plain English: For the Education of the Workers by the Workers*, Wharton's textbook provided much of the rhetorical framework that would characterize Le Sueur's pedagogy two decades later. As would Le Sueur, Wharton figures writing as practical labor, encouraging her students to "master the use of English words, the tools of your expression."[112] "Make your notebook your workshop," Wharton enjoins her students, figuring writing as the crafting of working-class identity in the same way that her chapter prefaces, each beginning "Dear Comrade," figure literary education as the cultivation-by-correspondence of working-class solidarity.[113] As would Le Sueur, moreover, Wharton seamlessly encodes leftist critique into her textbook's grammatical exercises, so that in a lesson on "Kinds of Sentences" Wharton asks students to explain the differences in the following sentences: "Two classes have always existed. To which class do you belong? Join your class in the struggle."[114] Finally, Wharton challenges the upper-class monopoly on literary culture, reminding her students that "the best of everything is none too good for you."

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[111] For Le Sueur's personal account of her parents' teaching work, see Meridel Le Sueur, *Crusaders: The Radical Legacy of Marian and Arthur Le Sueur* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984).

[112] Marian Wharton, *Plain English: For the Education of the Workers by the Workers* (Fort Scott, Kansas: The People's College, 1917), 30.

[113] Ibid., 19.

[114] Ibid., 50.

> It is your right, your heritage, and the best in the English language will bring you into the company and comradeship of the men and women who have striven and toiled for humanity, who will talk to you of dreams and deeds worth while, who will place in your hands the key to a new world.[115]

As Wharton's rhetoric of class uplift suggests, *Plain English* is ultimately less radical in outlook than *Worker Writers*, oriented more toward mechanical correctness than economic revolution. Le Sueur scholar Julia M. Allen reminds us that Wharton's pedagogical mission was empowering workers to succeed within, rather than militate against, a rapidly developing industrial-corporate regime, her students encouraged to prioritize class mobility over some endlessly deferred dictatorship of the proletariat.[116] "Don't think this is putting on airs," Wharton writes. "It is not. It is simply demanding the best for yourself in words, as you should do in everything. We of the working class have built the world in its beauty. Why should we live in shacks, dress in shoddy, talk in slang?"[117] For Le Sueur, in contrast, literary language was a "tool" for class conflict. "The English language is to be used," she wrote. "Those fighting for their daily lives today are the ones that are going to need to have that strong, sturdy language for their use."[118]

For all her working-class utilitarianism, however, Le Sueur's pedagogy revolved around a complicated—if not fully elaborated—theory of language as what she called "the 'action' of the creative worker," a quasi-performative utterance which labored into existence more egalitarian social relations.[119] Le Sueur glosses this theory in her creative writing textbook, where in her terms "dialectical" narrative structure models formally the dialectical transformation of society. "We not only want to describe the world, we want to change it," Le Sueur taught, sounding an Hegelian note. "[W]e need a structure that includes the thesis, the antithesis, and the synthesis."[120] Fuller

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[115] Ibid., 31.
[116] See Julia M. Allen, "'Dear Comrade': Marian Wharton of the People's College, Fort Scott, Kansas, 1914-1917," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 22, no. ½ (Spring-Summer, 1994), 123-124.
[117] Wharton, *Plain English*, 413.
[118] Le Sueur, *Worker Writers*, §1.
[119] Le Sueur, "Fetish," 22.
[120] Le Sueur, *Worker Writers*, §5.

development of her language theory comes in a series of essays that appeared in *New Masses* in late 1934 and early 1935. In "I Was Marching," an account of her work during the Minneapolis Truckers' Strike, Le Sueur argues that in bourgeois language use—and again her target is Proust—"words are likely to mean more than an event," with the event itself "the size of a pin point." In contrast, proletarian language use functions as real-historical action, since "in a crisis the word falls away and the skeleton of that action shows in terrific movement."[121] In "The Fetish of Being Outside," likewise, Le Sueur figures the proletarian writer as an avant-garde force "moving in the chaotic dark of a new creation"; while Le Sueur frequently figures this action as a form of labor, in "Fetish" she borrows from the language of evolution, noting that "even the lowest forms of life are able to step out in this belief into a new element and grow a new orientated fin or organ that makes creative alignments."[122] To be sure, Le Sueur's treatment of language as action is inconsistent; at times, she anticipates J. L. Austin's notion of "performativity," while at other moments she locates linguistic action in the materiality of language or the non-narrative lyricism of prose reveries. What matters is not so much detangling the knot of her folk philosophy, however, but acknowledging the multiple ways in which she instrumentalizes language as a tool for proletarian empowerment.

Le Sueur's most extensive theorization of language comes in her guide to the history and culture of Minnesota, a text titled *North Star Country* written and published under the auspices of Erskine Caldwell's American Folkways Series. Though unaffiliated with the WPA's more popular "American Guide" series, *North Star Country* reworks much of the same historical material that Le Sueur uncovered in her research as a staff member on the WPA's *Minnesota: A State Guide*. Both projects, for example, devote extensive space to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French fur traders like Pierre-Esprit Radisson and Médard des Groseilliers, tracking their decline and eventual downfall at the hands of John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company. Other iconic episodes in

[121] Le Sueur, "Marching," 158.
[122] Le Sueur, "Fetish," 23.

Minnesota history recur across both texts, from Zebulon Pike's securing of land at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers to the heroic exploits of the First Minnesota regiment at the battles of Bull Run and Gettysburg. Le Sueur's refashioning of this material—especially through her figuration of language as action—suggests the deep reservations she harbored regarding the WPA's ideological tendency, across the American Guide series, to frame history as a narrative of civilizational progress.

For like the WEP, the WPA's Washington-based Federal Writers' Project (FWP) exerted strong editorial control over a guidebook series otherwise researched, written, and produced at the state level, its centralized policies regulating everything from tone and style—"impersonal" prose was essential, passive voice discouraged—to questions of emphasis and organization. Word allotments, for instance, were strictly enforced to ensure "balance" and "proportionality," while the guides' distinctive "tours" of each state—though that word was prohibited—were expected to follow roadways from north to south and east to west, another useful lesson in American values.[123] Most significantly, while FWP editors permitted isolated critique of localized incidents, discrete historical episodes were structured within over-arching narratives of civilizational progress, so that the Minnesota guide opens by evoking the wonder of those historical processes that led Minnesota to its present grandeur:

> [W]ithin the span of a single lifetime, 54 million acres of forests, lakes, rivers, and untouched prairies have been converted into an organized area of industrial cities and rich farms, of colleges, art centers, golf clubs and parks. The men and women who accomplished this were for the most part New Englanders, Germans, and Scandinavians—probably as hardy as the world has produced.[124]

Tinged with racial pride, such narratives require the suppressing of the material and ideological violence underlying national progress, with Minnesota's forced displacement of Algonquin peoples

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[123] For more on FWP oversight of the American Guide series, see Christine Bold, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 12-35.

[124] WPA, *Minnesota: A State Guide* (New York: The Viking Press, 1938), 3.

converted to a "westward hegira" and centuries of cruelty toward Native Americans, workers, women, and Eastern and Southern European immigrants tidily bracketed as a "long series of unappetizing affairs."[125] The account of one FWP employee, editor of the New Jersey guide, speaks to the central office's strict enforcement of this American narrative:

> Our manuscripts told how Seabrook Farms had used teargas against the striking farm workers […] how trichinosis was spread from the meat of garbage-fed hogs. All of this material was killed in Washington, which finally sent an order that the words 'teargas' and 'trichinosis' were not be used in the New Jersey guide. It seemed to be the policy […] to tone down anything that looked controversial.[126]

As would WEP educators, therefore, FWP writers and researchers worked within the organization's editorial parameters to produce as accurate and as democratic a guide as institutionally possible. Le Sueur, on the other hand—whose objections to this kind of editing we might well imagine—simply wrote her own book.

In one of the remarkably few scholarly engagements with the American Guide series, Christine Bold argues convincingly that FWP administrators exploited the generic conventions of 1930s documentary, masking their ideological investments as objective research. The guides' "documentary status," Bold writes, "allowed project publicizers to speak of them as 'discovering'—rather than 'creating'—American culture, thus effectively naturalizing their very selective and interested representations."[127] Though FWP guides did not announce themselves as ideological, their narratives of civilizational progress allowed for the orderly management of differences that loomed threateningly outside the stable architecture of historiography, particularly in the 1930s. "The series as a whole," Bold explains, "is marked by a tendency to naturalize social difference—even social dysfunction—as 'local color,' part of an ultimately harmonious landscape defined as 'the

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[125] Ibid., 36.
[126] Quoted in Milton Meltzer, *Violins & Shovels: The WPA Arts Projects* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976), 109.
[127] Bold, *WPA*, xv.

nation.'"[128] *North Star Country* challenged this landscape by making visible what Jacob Riis had called an "other half" of American culture, those peoples and experiences neglected in more conventional histories. As Allred notes, such documentaries worked to disrupt "overarching metanarratives" like those scaffolded throughout *Minnesota: A State Guide*, an ideological intervention Allred links to a wider modernist "aesthetics of interruption."[129] Drawing heavily from historical anecdote, newspapers, folk songs, journals, maps, travelogues, and other archival material, *North Star Country* engages in precisely this interruption, figuring language itself as a technology of empire which—while historically abetting a capitalist class of bankers and land speculators—might be reclaimed as a tool for working-class enfranchisement.

North Star Country reads history, in other words, as enacting that dialectical narrative structure Le Sueur first imagines in *Worker Writers*, the documentary describing "the people" as a "story that never ends," a story "that is a long incessant coming alive from the earth."[130] Language as "the 'action' of the creative worker" is key to this "coming alive," a figuration invoked equally in wide-angle historical narration and in in-scene "showing" rendered with all the immediacy of Jamesian scenic method. Le Sueur narrates the long history of violence among Native Americans and Europeans, for example—including rigged land treaties, an important instance of language acting in history—through the re-articulation of place names, reading the American landscape as an evolving palimpsest scored over with the language of conquest. "[L]akes, mountains, rivers, forests reflect this confusion of enterprise," Le Sueur narrates, "they were named, renamed, and named again as they were lost, taken, stolen, ceded over, fought about."[131] At the same time, *North Star Country* zooms in on key moments in which performative utterances literally remake the continent; discussing La Salle's exploration of the Mississippi delta, Le Sueur treats massively consequential

[128] Ibid., 11.
[129] Allred, *American Modernism*, 14.
[130] Le Sueur, *North Star Country*, 321.
[131] Ibid., 44.

history through the most luminous of historical detail, a passage that bears quoting at length:

> All along the rich country they stopped, and La Salle donned his ermine robe, the seals and documents were unwrapped, and they took in the name of the King the copper country, even the silk worms in Arkansas—the prairie, the forests, the river broadening until you could not see a man across it. […] There was no record, no ledger, and yet they were creating it. The little clerk took out his notebook and wrote in it. La Salle put down every bend and even at night calculated what wealth might be accrued from an industry using the worms of the mulberry tree.[132]

The passage is a remarkable one, figuring language as a kind of croupier that abstracts and gathers the continent to itself; here, La Salle takes the copper country of Arkansas "in the name of the King" just as for Austin priest baptizes infant "in the name of" the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[133] If Le Sueur is critical of such procedures, her tone seems equally in awe of the reach and ramifications of language, seems to wonder at that commanding instrument La Salle wields.

For implicit in Le Sueur's historiography—evocative of Lévi-Strauss's "writing lesson" among the Nambikwara—is that the imperialistic action of language might be re-appropriated as a weapon for class struggle. Culminating in the Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934, *North Star Country* resounds in its second half with the language of proletarian activism, with iron workers, river-pilots, farmers, and lumberjacks crafting their own autochthonous language to describe not only their work but the wider social and economic contexts in which it takes place:

> They named the machines they worked with: 'cat,' 'tractor,' 'donkey'—a small engine which yards and loads; 'hoot-nanny'—a device to hold a crosscut saw while sawing a log from underneath; and the saw itself was a 'Swedish fiddle.' Then they named the experiences, the actions. 'Give her snooze,' meaning more power; 'driving the pitch'—to drive logs as long as you can see them. […] To 'Saginaw' a log is to retard the large end, and to 'St. Croix' her is to help the small end gain. The 'wobbly horrors' were what employers got in a strike.[134]

In contrast to La Salle's performativity, here the sonic presence of the workers' jargon instances the material "rustle" of language, an alternative form of linguistic action which gestures, as Roland

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[132] Ibid., 52-54.
[133] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 25-38.
[134] Ibid., 230.

Barthes puts it, to a "fragment of utopia."[135] In the same way, that is, that Le Sueur's pedagogy critiqued *Partisan Review*'s "intellectual, inhuman, non-human" Marxism, her folk philosophy of language indicts language use abstracted from the lived experiences of indigenous and working-class Americans.[136] Language, for Le Sueur, was a material thing, her depiction of turn-of-the-century Populist meetings echoing workers in its assertion that "we must talk it over, thresh it out, winnow it down, mill it, grind it."[137] *North Star Country* was that kind of grind.

Le Sueur's proletarian reworking of history came in for strong critique from reviewers who found her narrative, as the *New York Herald Tribune* put it, "erroneous to a degree bordering fantasy." From Le Sueur, Stewart Holbrook wrote, one "would get the impression that pretty much all of North Star country is under mortgage to fat and grinning bankers, and that most of the farms had blown away on dust storms anyway."[138] In *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Howard Mumford Jones similarly objected to Le Sueur's proletarian bias: "It is a 'folkway' to cheat Indians and be massacred by them in 1862, just as it is a 'folkway' for Minnesota gendarmes to fire into a mass of strikers. But it is not a 'folkway' to have lived a middle-class life in La Crosse, Wisconsin, as I did. In fact, 'folkways' seem to be confined to (a) the country life; (b) persons not of 'Old American' stock; (c) the proletariat."[139] The extent of these reviews, however, suggests the singular importance of a text which—one of 28 in Caldwell's American Folkways Series—might easily have fallen into literary oblivion, a text integral to the proletarian tradition and which at the same time looked forward to postwar aesthetic strategies simplified as "show don't tell." For insofar as the polemic of *North Star Country* relies on an aesthetic of visuality—Le Sueur's scenic method understood as the literary equivalent of Walker Evans's gelatin-tint photographs—we might understand the text as a precursor

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[135] Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1989), 70.
[136] Quoted in Pratt, "Woman Writer," 252.
[137] Le Sueur, *North Star Country*, 205.
[138] Stewart Holbrook, "Six Months of Good Sledding," *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review* VII (December 16, 1945), 3.
[139] Howard Mumford Jones, "'Folklore' and the Upper Middlewest," *The Saturday Review of Literature* 29 (January 5, 1946), 11.

to the "New Critical" privileging of implicit political suggestion over didactic commentary. Indeed, as a genre 1930s documentary sought, William Stott explains, to "treat [lower-class] experience in such a way as to […] render it vivid, 'human,' and—most often—poignant to the audience," resorting in many cases to the photographer's camera to "show" what language could not.[140] Le Sueur's workshop lesson to "SHOW it actually happening," then, might be read not only as promoting more immediate representation of working-class experience, but as a translation into pedagogy of her contemporaneous documentary work.[141]

III. *I Hear Men Talking*

"The summation, the synthesis, the moral": A précis

What I have called Le Sueur's folk philosophy of language extends as well, finally, to the fiction for which she is most widely known, manifesting in ways that complicate her own opposition to modernist technique. While scholars of the Depression-era Left, including Foley, have focused almost exclusively on Le Sueur's closely autobiographical novel, *The Girl*—reading it as a feminist and regionalist re-articulation of 1930s-style proletarianism[142]—it is Le Sueur's early novel, *I Hear Men Talking*, that most fully theorizes language as "the 'action' of the creative worker," a "word dropped in the dark," as Le Sueur put it, that might "produce a movement, even a miraculous form that has not hitherto existed."[143] For Le Sueur, *I Hear Men Talking* was one such form.

Unpublished until 1984, *I Hear Men Talking* is packed full of instances in which language, in various forms, "shows in terrific movement," shedding its husk of representation in order to labor

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140 William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 62.
141 Le Sueur, *Worker Writers*, §4.
142 For the most extensive treatment of Le Sueur's fiction, see especially Coiner, *Better Red*, 101-112; Denning, *Cultural Front*, 200-229; Foley, *Radical*, 235-242; and Alan Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 95-100.
143 Le Sueur, "Fetish," 23.

as real-historical presence.[144] The pervasive gossip that runs throughout the novel's unnamed Iowa town, for instance, appears in an extended mixed metaphor as indiscriminate animal violence, the town's "tongues clack[ing], striking flint on flint like a pack of starved wolves." "They tore what they could get their teeth in," Le Sueur writes, "tore it beyond any shred of its truth."[145] Similarly, the language of the titular "men talking"—radical agrarians, as I will explain, engaged in a series of labor actions against outside exploitation—begins as a "low tight sound that gathered around an invisible object," a material force "approaching slowly, like a season, striking down, slowly mounting from the steady flow of their words."[146] A peripheral concern at first, the farmers' talk builds to become the primary driving action of the novel, a form of collective labor under which its word-workers strain as if "lifting some heavy invisible stone […] or like men in a quarry hefting new rock, speaking serious words: produce without market, spill the milk, picket the highways."[147]

Le Sueur's theorization of language as action is not merely rhetorical, however, nor restricted to the simplistic metaphorization of language as labor; rather, in its very form *I Hear Men Talking* enacts that broader societal "movement into […] synthesis" that Le Sueur envisions in *Worker Writers*, the novel's dialectical structure modeling the transformative "movement and solidarity of all life." This structure manifests in two ways—first, in interwoven narrative threads each of which twines around "forces [that] come into collision" and builds to what Le Sueur calls "the summation, the synthesis, the moral," and, second, in a prose style that synthesizes subjective reverie and objective description.[148] Ultimately, Le Sueur's fictional prose significantly complicates proletarian expressionism, sounding, in fact, an unmistakably modernist note.

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144 Le Sueur, "Marching," 158.
145 Meridel Le Sueur, *I Hear Men Talking* (Minneapolis: West End Press, 1984), 59.
146 Ibid., 43.
147 Ibid., 78.
148 Le Sueur, *Worker Writers*, §5.

“Dynamic showing,” Dialectical Prose: Le Sueur as modernist

Though parts of the novel were composed as early as the 1920s, the majority of *I Hear Men Talking* was written sometime after the climactic summer of 1934, when contemporaneous with the great industrial strikes a number of smaller agrarian protests swept the Midwest, including the “milk strikes” and “penny auctions” that figure prominently in the novel’s plot. Le Sueur experienced much of this labor unrest firsthand, incorporating such protests into *I Hear Men Talking* alongside memories of her parents’ Progressive-era socialist activism in Kansas and North Dakota.

Indeed, the family at the center of *I Hear Men Talking*—the novel’s protagonist, teenage Penelope; her mother Mona; and Mona’s live-in boyfriend, the transient union organizer Lowell—closely resembles Le Sueur’s own childhood experience, with both fictional and real families, for example, converting their homes into meeting halls for dissenting laborers. It is Lowell, acting in the generic role of class-conscious outsider, who spearheads the effort to organize the novel’s disenfranchised farmers, providing language and practical strategies, like the penny auction, with which they might more effectively protest the policies of absentee bankers and land speculators. Prominent among agrarians of the 1930s, the penny auction was particularly effective in combating the foreclosing and selling at auction of over-mortgaged farm properties, with radicalized farmers gathering at foreclosed-on farms and—simply by standing in a unified bloc—intimidating potential bidders into silence. Such an auction occurs at the climax of *I Hear Men Talking*, when one Saturday afternoon the banker Swillman reneges on his pledge to halt foreclosure proceedings at Peterson’s farm, a property which represented to its owner “the sole fruit of a half-century’s work.”[149] In response, some five-hundred farmers pile into pickups and descend en masse on Peterson’s property, hiding weapons in nearby cornfields, stopping approaching cars, and cutting telephone wires to prevent Swillman from calling the sheriff. Reminiscent of the highly organized picket lines of Minneapolis,

[149] Le Sueur, *I Hear*, 90.

the farmers' effort ultimately proves successful, as, when the few bidders who navigate their embargo remain silent, Lowell and his comrades purchase the farm for a penny and restore it to its original owner.

Interwoven with this labor narrative is Penelope's own sexual coming-of-age, her adolescent development closely linked with her coming into class-consciousness as a worker. *I Hear Men Talking* tracks Penelope's burgeoning sexuality through her courtship with Bac Kelly, the hulking son of a local farmer whose menace, real and imagined, increases throughout the novel until his attempted rape of Penelope in the climactic scene. Having already betrayed Lowell and the farmers to the town sheriff—too late, we learn, to stop their auction protest—Bac lures Penelope out to Mumser's Orchard, where, in prose evocative of Greek myth, he pursues her through its gnarled landscape "like a mad goat," "running through the grasses, hitting his face against the low swinging branches."[150] Catching her in his "rock grip," Bac looms over and kisses Penelope before she manages to wrestle free. As she flees, the orchard around her seems to Penelope to possess "an old power of procreation," Le Sueur writes, "the dark leaves flung skywards, the round fruit drooping groundward, revealing something that spoke and yet whose speech was lost in the round fruiting."[151] Le Sueur's stylized treatment of Penelope's sexuality lends her prose what critics have called its "Lawrentian" quality, since Le Sueur's charged lyricism figures sex as a transformative—and frequently violent—initiatory experience.[152] Penelope's true coming-of-age, however, occurs not through sex but one of its consequences—birth. Near the end of the novel, as its labor and Lawrentian narratives climax, Penelope helps the town doctor deliver neighbor Cora Fearing's baby boy, the moment closely linking Penelope's coming-into-consciousness as both woman and worker.

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150 Ibid., 104.
151 Ibid., 105.
152 For more on Le Sueur's "Lawrentian" prose style, see Denning, *Cultural Front*, 220; Wald, *Exiles*, 98; and Elaine Hedges, "Introduction," in *Ripenings: Selected Work*, ed. Elaine Hedges (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), 24.

"'I been a laboring too,'" Penelope proudly declares afterward, her pun emphasizing feminine identity and working-class solidarity as mutually constitutive processes.[153]

Both narratives in *I Hear Men Talking* constitute what Le Sueur called "dialectical structures," imaging broader societal transformation through the "dynamic showing of the forces to come into collision," whether those forces be economic, sexual, or gestational.[154] Yet Penelope's delivery of Fearing's baby—or Le Sueur's treatment of that moment—signals too what we might think of as the novel's dialectical prose *style*, shuttling as the passage does between inner emotion and exterior action, between the lyricism of subjective reverie and the realism of objective description:

> She kept her eyes on Dr. Starry. His hands moved exact and real. He looked at her, holding her rigid to what would be expected of her. She felt something striking in her, leaving no loose ends, catching her up so she moved like the instruments he took from his bag, moved under his hands direct and keen, with joy, her movements held within the time of what was happening, cutting through, waiting upon it as if something passed from an unknown world beyond them into their hands, and they took it, threading it through them precisely and nakedly, passing it on to death if it should be, to birth if it should be.[155]

As Le Sueur would later explain, the almost erotic lyricism of this passage "function[s] as part of the action," with external events "told in active prose, in contrast to the poetic and lyrical song of the girl trying to find her place."[156] As a form of action Le Sueur's prose style shows—rather than tells about—Penelope's subjective experience as she encounters and labors over "objective" reality. For as Penelope begins to understand, such reality is only ever a matrix of multiple languages, perspectives, and experiences: perpetually in flux, dialectically evolving. Toward the end of the novel, as the town's gossip takes on a life of its own, Penelope reads that matrix, "seeing then three things," Le Sueur writes: "what had happened, what had been said about it, and what it had become

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153 Le Sueur, *I Hear*, 102.
154 Le Sueur, *Worker Writers*, §5.
155 Le Sueur, *I Hear*, 94.
156 Meridel Le Sueur, "Afterward," in *I Hear Men Talking* (Minneapolis: West End Press, 1984), 241.

in Miss Shelley's mind, fusing together, lapping over."[157] As elsewhere, the materiality of Le Sueur's prose—fusing, lapping, like electrical soldering or textile folding—points to her theory of language as actively reworking real-historical experience, subjectivity reaching out and transforming the world with its linguistic tools. It is her intervention in this shifting ontological field that makes Penelope one of Le Sueur's "creative workers," a figure whose action contravenes other de-creative linguistic practices, in particular the speculative discourses—from gossip to farm foreclosures—that run behind the more material action of *I Hear Men Talking*. Penelope's agency as a creative worker—indeed as a "creative writer"—is literalized as she takes over the bookkeeping for the farmers' commissary, "mak[ing] a kind of record when one man took more than he left, saying he would bring something when he had it." "And this she wrote down," Le Sueur describes, "besides names that were German, Irish, English, feeling proud of the book, keeping its records as clean as she might."[158]

I Hear Men Talking thus carries over from Le Sueur's pedagogical and documentary work a commitment to language as action which, as it appears in "dialectical" prose, complicates her relation to 1930s-style proletarianism, a movement uninterested, as Gold described it, in "verbal acrobatics" or "sickly mental states [with] their subtleties, their sentimentalities, their fine-spun affairs."[159] While Gold decried the "extreme subjectivism of the contemporary bourgeois artist," Le Sueur's proletarian writing deconstructs objective experience into a tissue of sensory perceptions and interior affects, subjective states Le Sueur renders in fine lyricism that earned her, in fact, the rebuke of Communist Party cultural bosses.[160] Her folk philosophy of language, that is, walks Le Sueur into precisely those modernist techniques she ridiculed throughout her career, her lyrical reveries closely

[157] Le Sueur, *I Hear*, 73.
[158] Ibid., 113.
[159] Gold, "Notes," 5.
[160] Gold, "Stein," 25.

echoing the "long beautiful and ornate sentences" of that "sick nobleman," Marcel Proust.[161] Moreover, Le Sueur's manipulation of literary realism corresponds, of course, with an entire spectrum of modernist experimentation, from Pound's vorticism to Woolf's impressionism, and her tendency, in *I Hear Men Talking*, to focalize narration through multiple characters at once—though I have not elaborated on it here—adapts one of the central techniques of Joyce's *Ulysses*. And finally, Le Sueur's fiction constitutes a translation of that modernist technique most integral to 1930s documentary, a genre in which "objective" history is rewritten from the perspective of oppressed subjectivities. In such documentaries, Allred explains, writers rework realist modes of representation "by mediating between things themselves and the inner processes by which they are perceived," disrupting thereby the dominant narratives that structure American experience.[162] From a wider perspective, Le Sueur's proletarian "creative worker" seems far more closely affianced to Dos Passos's modernist technician than either might suggest.

We might, therefore, begin to resituate Le Sueur's work at the center of that crucial interchange between proletarian commitment and modernist technical experimentation through which, in the 1930s, almost every major writer passed. For the contradictions inherent in this work—Le Sueur's simultaneous disavowal and deployment of modernist techniques, her sometimes inconsistent instrumentalization of language—ultimately refract contradictions endemic to 1930s literary leftism, tensions which resulted, I've argued, from the cleaving into opposed factions of a prior craft ideal. While much of Le Sueur's work is indebted to Gold's self-expressive proletarianism, her theories of language betray her aspirations to modernist technical virtuosity, her effort, like Dos Passos, to let language realize itself through its formal—for Le Sueur "dialectical"—action. Taken as a whole, Le Sueur's career solders together a craft ideal that runs like faulty wiring through the 1930s Left, her work fusing the writer's expressive labor with technical rigor and theoretical sophistication. More

161 Le Sueur, *Worker Writers*, §2.
162 Allred, *American Modernism*, 11.

importantly, Le Sueur's proletarian modernism shows how modernism itself was forged, in part, within and against the 1930s literary Left, to the point that major modernist concerns—like the relation between aesthetic and political avant gardes—seem inextricable from questions of labor and industry. We might understand Le Sueur's linguistic "action" by its other name, then, a name she invoked frequently across the wide range of her literary work—"craft."

"He wrote in wood"

If Le Sueur's career reconciles opposed aspects of an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal, those aspects manifest variously in her contradictory invocations of the word—and practice of—*craft*, one of the keywords that run throughout her oeuvre.

In *I Hear Men Talking*, craft is time and again figured as the impersonal, almost inhuman, exploitation of one's fellow man, a kind of cold, technical precision associated with gossip and sexual violence. An early lyrical prologue to the novel, for instance, figures the town's prolific gossip through synecdoche, Le Sueur describing "*all the Eyes looking* [*at*] *you—the crafty ones, the gimlet eyes, measuring and calculating* […] *with a cunning that closed the door too close behind a man's coming in*."[163] Similarly, Bac watches Penelope just before he assaults her "with indifference born of craft," carefully "making no move as he knew to watch rabbits, until they sat up, revealing their white underbodies to him, teaching him just the moment to let go at them."[164] This is, to resort to the OED, craft "in a bad sense," a "skill or art applied to deceive or overreach." Linked with "deceit, guile, fraud, [and] cunning," this is the craft of the Pharisees who in the gospel of Mark consider "how they might take him by craft, and put him to death," the craft of Hobbes's Leviathan who as absolute sovereign practices "that Crooked Wisdome, which is called Craft."[165] Appearing some two

[163] Le Sueur, *I Hear*, 2.
[164] Ibid., 47.
[165] *Oxford English Dictionary, s.v.* "craft, n. 4," accessed March 3, 2019.

dozen times in the novel, the "craft" of *I Hear Men Talking* is the fastidious technical mastery which Le Sueur in more polemical modes associates with the "inhuman" leftism of *Partisan Review*, in particular its privileging of aesthetic standards over the lived experiences of the working class.

At the same time, an alternative, more positive figuration of craft—one which speaks to both aspects of the craft ideal—runs through *North Star Country*, in which Le Sueur lavishes attention on a Scandinavian carpenter on the nineteenth-century Minnesota frontier. In one of the documentary's brilliant moments of scenic detail, Le Sueur describes how the work of "Jacob the Carpenter" literally expresses its maker's working-class identity. "There are people today who can tell anything that Jacob has built," Le Sueur writes. "They can tell the barns—so solid they have grown like a living body and become part of the ground. […] He could not write, but he wrote in wood, and you can read the scroll of a good workman, a craftsman."[166] Yet Jacob's labor is characterized too by its demonstrable technical virtue:

> He handled all his life the lathe, the center and the spiral bit, the brace, the ax, saw, claw hammer, small augers, mallet gouges, gimlets, and the badawl. He had in his toolbox the chisel, the iron square, the rule, and the chalk line. In his early buildings you can see the wood pins, squared off neat as you please with an ax. When he came to this country he had to get used to the woodcraft of the open fields: how to hang a gate, which is an art in itself; how to make roofs for the prairies, strong king posts to hold against the wind.

Jacob, in other words, is the prototypical craftsman of the American Arts and Crafts movement, his "engaged material consciousness" simultaneously expressive and technically rigorous. Opposed by Le Sueur to deadening and de-creative speculative discourses, Jacob's craftsmanship gives life to his frontier community, the dignity his work provides—the sense of purpose and fulfillment and vitality to be found in all genuine craftsmanship—succinctly suggested in the evolution of Jacob's work as it

[166] Le Sueur, *North Star Country*, 141-142.

is linked, dialectically, to the life and labor of the Plains states. "When building stopped," Le Sueur writes, "Jacob became a coffin-maker."[167]

To confront craft in *I Hear Men Talking* is to experience, beyond the term's moral ambiguity, Le Sueur's conviction that modernist technical virtuosity might be enlisted in the struggle for proletarian and working-class enfranchisement. Amid the schisms and cleavages of the 1930s, she looked back to a prior craft ideal that championed the individual worker as capable of meaningful material production—her own work updates that ideal for an industrial age.

[167] Ibid., 142.

Chapter Three

"Significant Craft": Robert Duncan and the Black Mountain Craft Ideal

Though the movement endures in various avatars to the present, craft scholars date the decline of American Arts and Crafts roughly to 1916, identifying around that time a number of interrelated failures within craft institutions. That year, Gustav Stickley's movement-defining journal *The Craftsman* appeared on newsstands for the final time, swept under in the bankruptcy that had already led Stickley to shutter operations at his Morris County community, Craftsman Farms. It had been Stickley, more than any other craft ideologue, who popularized the social, economic, and aesthetic value of craftsmanship, acquainting American audiences with the philosophies of William Morris and John Ruskin, to whom the first two issues of *The Craftsman* were dedicated. One year prior to Stickley's bankruptcy, fellow craft proponent and founder of the utopian Roycroft Community, Elbert Hubbard, had died in the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Three years before that, in 1912, the influential national journal *Handicraft* ceased operations, discontinued by an under-funded and increasingly irrelevant Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston.[1]

The death-dates for American Arts and Crafts are as numerous, potentially, as the forms the movement adopted. One of the more poetic timestamps for its decline, though, might be 1913, the year that Stickley's doomed cathedral to craft, the Craftsman Building, opened in a city still buzzing over the "Armory Show" that had closed its doors three months earlier. While the American Arts and Crafts movement imploded for multiple reasons endemic to craft itself, its demise was hastened by the fauvist color palettes and cubist fragmentation of a show which conferred on craft an even

[1] See Robert Judson Clark, "The Eastern Seaboard," in *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1876-1916*, ed. Robert Judson Clark (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 9-10 and Lionel Lambourne, *Utopian Craftsman: The Arts and Crafts Movement from the Cotswolds to Chicago* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1980), 162. Jonathan Leo Fairbanks, in contrast, dates the decline of American Arts and Crafts to the rise of modernist design in the 1940s. See Jonathan Leo Fairbanks, "Shaping Craft in an American Framework," in *Craft in America: Celebrating Two Centuries of Artists and Objects*, eds. Jo Lauria and Steve Fenton (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2007), 276.

quainter, more sepia-tinted aura than the movement had already possessed. Indeed, there is grim resonance in the fact that, as Stickley hung draperies and arranged chaises longues in his Craftsman Building, the art movement for which the era would be named was exploding into existence a mile away. "[T]he art event of the season," *The Craftsman* had called the Armory Show, devoting two paragraphs to the exhibition in an issue featuring articles like "What To Prune and How to Spray" and a poem—written by Margaret Widdemer in rhymed couplets—called "The House of Ghosts."[2] By 1913, the craft movement seemed exactly that.

Though American Arts and Crafts was moribund by the 1930s, the exigencies of the Depression would have a resuscitative effect on craft practices, with many Americans returning to craft not as some rarefied aesthetic endeavor—much less as a protest against modernity—but as a matter of necessity, taking up crafts like sewing, quilting, carpentry, and even architecture as a means of supporting their families. As the economy contracted, Americans looked back to those skills which had empowered their ancestors to break the plains and drive the cattle and raise the roofbeams beneath which the continent had become a home.[3] Despite the limited resources of Depression-era America, communities of craft teaching were established in multiple formats, from rural institutions dedicated to preserving indigenous labor practices to prestigious coastal schools where craft became part of a broader arts curriculum for the nation's elite.[4] Alongside the labor colleges of the WPA's Workers' Education Program, moreover, craft played an integral role in a progressive education movement for which activities like carpentry, book-binding, and weaving constituted a means of making labor "intellectually fruitful"; as progressive scion John Dewey put it, craft allowed student-

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[2] "An Art Event," *The Craftsman* 23, no. 6 (March, 1913), 726.

[3] For examples of the resurgence of craft communities in the Depression, see Jo Lauria and Steve Fenton, *Craft in America: Celebrating Two Centuries of Artists and Objects* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2007).

[4] Foremost among rural craft institutions were the Highlander Folk School in eastern Tennessee and the Penland School of Crafts in western North Carolina. In contrast, more elite coastal institutions included the Rhode Island School of Design and the California College of the Arts, in Oakland.

workers to recover "the continuity of aesthetic experience with normal processes of living."[5] Even as the American Arts and Crafts movement died out, that is, craft itself remained pivotal to a wide range of economic and educational institutions.

A composite of these institutions—part arts school, part labor college, part experiment in democracy—Black Mountain College in western North Carolina likewise placed craft at the center of its curriculum, promoting a "craft ideal" quite similar to the one that had animated the early twentieth-century American Arts and Crafts movement. I have shown how that ideal—the belief that workers' engaged, expressive labor should at the same time adhere fastidiously to technical standards like those enforced by pre-industrial guilds—cleaved into opposing factions of the 1930s Left; but it also reemerged whole at Black Mountain in 1933, in the creative work of its faculty, in weaving, ceramics, and poetry workshops, on the college farm and on kitchen detail. If the crafts movement balanced expressive labor with fidelity to inherited technique, however, at Black Mountain students' expression was tempered as well by the resistances of craft material itself. Black Mountain pedagogues conceptualized craft as a self-annulling discipline, a way of sublimating the expressive ego in and through materiality. And as that word—"sublimate," from the Latin for "lifting up" or "deliverance"—implies, Black Mountain's was a *spiritualized* craft ideal. As in the American Arts and Crafts movement, the worker's labor constituted a spiritual process in its own right, intimate engagement with simple materials that facilitated freer, more authentic expression. At Black Mountain, additionally, submission to his materials allowed the craftsman to embody formally a higher order of creation, to access a universal spiritual plane unapproachable via more egoistic forms of making. Through craft, Black Mountain's first course catalogue asserted—"some kind of art-experience, which is not necessarily the same as self-expression"—students could "come to the realization of order in the world," attaining "firmer control of [themselves] and [their] environment

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[5] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1916), 264. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1934), 9.

than is possible through purely intellectual effort."[6]

Attending to the ways in which a craft ideal informs—and is transformed by—aesthetic theory and practice at Black Mountain not only helps us track the evolution of American Arts and Crafts ideology, but to reassess the work of key Black Mountain figures, including visual artists Josef and Anni Albers and poet Robert Duncan. For the school's spiritualized craft ideal took many forms, from the Alberses' arts pedagogy to a college-wide "work program" to Duncan's postwar "field poetics," described by Duncan in terms resonant with craft overtones: poetry was "not a stream of consciousness," he averred, "but an area of composition in which I work with whatever comes into it."[7] De-privileging lyric expression, Duncan sought to manifest in aesthetic form what he saw as a second, more spiritual order of creation, a supernatural design made present through the materiality of language. Writing to Denise Levertov, Duncan argued that the poet's ability to access "the hidden and life-creative and destructive ID-entity underlying and overriding the conveniences of personal identity is what makes the difference between mere craft (the triviality of workmanship in and of itself) and significant craft."[8] In this chapter, I argue that Duncan's "significant craft" extends the objectives of Black Mountain College itself, in particular the Alberses' pedagogies and creative practices. Establishing this affiliation means rethinking the scholarly tendency to link Duncan to Black Mountain primarily through his relationship with rector Charles Olson. Influenced by Donald Allen's 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, Robert Von Hallberg, for instance, finds Olson's poetic "transmission of energy" crucial for Duncan's own spiritual poetics. Joseph Conte and Anne Day Dewey, likewise, cite the poets' shared interest in collage, process-

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[6] Quoted in Katherine Chaddock Reynolds, *Visions and Vanities: John Andrew Rice of Black Mountain College* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 124.

[7] Robert Duncan, "Introduction to *Bending the Bow*," in *The Collected Later Poems and Plays*, ed. Peter Quartermain (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 297.

[8] Duncan to Denise Levertov, October 19, 1971, in *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 665.

based poetics, open form, and seriality as evidence of Olson's influence on the younger Duncan.[9] Though not inaccurate, such appraisals ignore the continuity of Duncan's work with broader Black Mountain aesthetics.

For what Duncan called "significant craft" Josef called "articulation in visual form," Anni "meaningful form." In dealing "with visual matter, the stuff the world is made of," Anni Albers explained, "the inherent discipline of matter acts as a regulative force: not everything 'goes.'" The artist, therefore, must "circumvent the NO of the material with the YES of an inventive solution."[10] Examining courses in drawing, design, and weaving, including an introductory course called "Werklehre"—literally "work teaching" or "how to work"—I show how Black Mountain pedagogy fostered what Richard Sennett has called craft's "engaged material consciousness," promoting flexibility, experimentation, and constructive thinking through students' immediate engagement with craft materials.[11] Rather than employing paper as simply a flat material to be written upon—"whereby one side of the paper loses its expression," Josef argued—students emphasized the paper's edge by standing it, sculpting it into mobiles, twisting, sewing, and even riveting it, all in an effort to short-circuit hard-wired patterns of "vision and articulation." If such defamiliarization cultivated "independent thinking and […] an individual style," however, that individuality differed dramatically from mere self-expression, since students' discoveries were made possible by the resistances to which they were subject.[12] "Standing between the actual and that which may be," Anni wrote, the

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[9] See Donald Allen, ed. *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Robert Von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 31; Joseph Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Anne Day Dewey, *Beyond Maximus: The Construction of Public Voice in Black Mountain Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). For two other influential accounts stressing the association between Duncan and Olson see Stephen Collins and Graham Lyons, eds., *Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and the Poetics of Derivation* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012) and Edward Halsey Foster: *Understanding the Black Mountain Poets* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

[10] Anni Albers, "Conversations with Artists," in *Anni Albers: Selected Writings on Design*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 200), 53.

[11] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 120.

[12] Josef Albers, "Werklicher formunterricht [Teaching Form Through Practice]," The Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, accessed June 10, 2019, http://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/texts/.

craftsman "forego[es] his own identity in order […] more impartially to interpret the potential" of his material.[13] As in the American Arts and Crafts movement, adherence to technical standards—enforced at Black Mountain by materiality itself—promoted more authentic expression, leaving the craftsman "free to follow the promptings of material."[14] Josef articulated this aspect of the Black Mountain craft ideal with characteristic directness: "a teaching method mainly concerned with self-expression," he stated, "is wrong, psychologically and artistically."[15]

For both artists, as for Duncan, submission to material resistances was a means of unlocking—or of embodying in aesthetic form—universal spiritual order, a plane of abstract forms underlying all creation. The craft objects produced at Black Mountain College, therefore, constituted what Bill Brown calls "object-events," catalyzing "some crack in time's homogeneity, some break through the continuum we know as human history."[16] Combining the abstraction and self-renunciation of De Stijl with Constructivist fidelity to materials, the Alberses viewed aesthetic making as a transubstantiative process, a means, Anni wrote, of "listening for the dictation of the material" in order to "tak[e] part in an eternal order."[17] As one of Josef's students phrased it in a notebook: "God forever geometrizes."[18] And—true to form, we might say—spiritual geometries run throughout the Alberses' work from this period; in weavings and wall-hangings, lithographs and machine-engraved platens, the Alberses' use of spareness and abstraction suggest a renunciatory effort toward absolute order, a spiritual harmony re-presented in relations among line, color, and shape. Refocusing on media traditionally marginalized within art history and theory—including

[13] Anni Albers, "Designing as Visual Organization," in *Anni Albers: Selected Writings on Design*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 200), 60.

[14] Anni Albers, "Design: Anonymous and Timeless," The Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, accessed June 10, 2019, http://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/texts/. Anni Albers, "Material as Metaphor," The Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, accessed June 10, 2019, http://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/texts/.

[15] Josef Albers, "On Education and Art Education," The Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, accessed June 10, 2019, http://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/texts/.

[16] Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 126.

[17] Anni Albers, "Work with Materials," The Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, accessed June 10, 2019, http://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/texts/.

[18] John Urbain, "Class notes from Albers," Black Mountain College Project Collection, PC.7008 Box 19: NP, North Carolina Western Regional Archives.

work from both artists inspired by recently excavated pre-Columbian sites in Mexico—I show in this chapter how Black Mountain's craft pedagogy translated into artistic practice. In doing so, I chart how the Alberses' interest in craft as a spiritual discipline evolved from their earlier work at the Staatliches Bauhaus, where craft practices had constituted preparatory training for industrial design and manufacture. While scholars have discussed Bauhaus "prototyping" at great length, far less examined has been the transformation of this industrial impetus among ex-Bauhäuslers in the United States.[19] At Black Mountain College, the Alberses reconceived craft as both a spiritual process and formal egress onto universal order; craft would no longer be directed exclusively toward industry, Anni Albers wrote in 1939, but "to our lasting fundamental spiritual, emotional, and sensuous needs: to the spirit."[20]

Recognizing, however, that its spiritualized craft ideal was not merely a set of metaphors, I attend too in this chapter to the Black Mountain work program in farming and construction, manual labor central to the aesthetic experience and financial solvency of the college itself. A synthesis of progressive education and a manual labor movement dormant since 1845, Black Mountain's work program aimed, like contemporary curricula at Antioch College and Deep Springs College, at fostering the self-discipline integral to democratic society, exposing students at the same time to the spiritual benefits of manual labor. Work, therefore—whether milking cows or silaging corn, pouring concrete or raising wall-frames—was accomplished "in perfect order," Louis Adamic reported in *Harper's*, "even with form."[21] Treating the 1940 construction of the Bauhaus-inspired "Studies Building" as a case study, I assess the practical viability of "significant craft," the capacity of work—

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[19] For the relationship between Bauhaus craft and industry, see especially Herbert Bayer, "The Role of Handicrafts at the Bauhaus," in *Bauhaus 1919-1928*, eds. Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, and Ise Gropius (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1938); Charles Darwent, *Josef Albers: Life and Work* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2018); Elaine S. Hochman, *Bauhaus: Crucible of Modernism* (New York: Fromm, 1997); Edward Lucie-Smith, *The Story of Craft: The Craftsman's Role in Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); and Ta'i Smith, *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014)

[20] Anni Albers, "Art—A Constant," in *Anni Albers: Selected Writings on Design*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 11.

[21] Louis Adamic, *My America* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1938), 625.

as lived reality—to open onto higher, spiritual orders. Theodore Dreier, de facto head of the work program, was remarkably sanguine about the spiritual potential of labor, recording in his journal that "the spirit was really excellent" on October 7, 1940, for example, or that, two weeks later on October 29, "the spirit was good today. We worked late and had quite a feeling of accomplishment at the end."[22] While many students and faculty ratified Dreier's assessment, buying wholesale into the "work mystique" that gathered around the construction of the Studies Building, others, lampooning Dreier as the "chief Messianist of work," saw the program as mere drudgery, criticizing its autocratic nature and objecting to its domination of cultural life at Black Mountain. History teacher Eric Bentley, for one, complained that "labor is the curse of this world, and nobody can meddle with it without becoming proportionably brutified." Likewise provoked by the college's gospel of work, two students parodied its pretension to spiritual vitalism by posting a notice on a campus bulletin board: "WANTED: ZOMBIES FOR THE WORK PROGRAM."[23]

Literalizing a craft ideal that found in the discipline of material resistances an avenue toward spiritual order—not unlike the Transcendentalist movement to which the school was frequently compared—Black Mountain's work program raises the question of what happens when "significant craft" loses its significance, when "work" simply does not work. For like the very idea of poetry as craft—from Horace's admonition to put "badly turned lines back on the anvil" to contemporary creative writing pedagogies organized around "structure," "texture," and "tone"—the significant craft of Black Mountain College is a metaphor, a figuration carrying over the experience of manual labor into the process of aesthetic creation, sometimes with little acknowledgement of the degradations of work itself.[24] "The stubble-field becomes a poem," Black Mountain co-founder

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[22] Theodore Dreier, "Lake Eden Construction Journal," Theodore and Barbara Loines Dreier Black Mountain College Collection, PC.1956, Box 39: NP, North Carolina Western Regional Archives.

[23] See Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1972), 257, 158.

[24] Horace, "The Art of Poetry," trans. D. A. Russell, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, eds. D. A. Russell and Michael Winterbottom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 109.

John Andrew Rice asserted in 1942, positing a lossless translation from vehicle to tenor and reminding us that that translation—from work to writing, manual to mental labor—is planted deep in the etymology of "verse," the plowman's turning at field's edge.[25]

That work was crucial, I've suggested, to the poetics of Duncan and the Alberses, just as it animated the field poetics of Black Mountain College's last rector, Charles Olson, who in his iconic statement on "Projective Verse" imagined an equally lossless metaphor, a perfect translation from field to field. "[*A*]*ll* parts of speech," Olson argued, "suddenly, in composition by field, are fresh for both sound and percussive use, spring up like unknown, unnamed vegetables in the patch, when you work it, come spring."[26]

This chapter tests the fidelity of that metaphor.

I. Josef and Anni Albers

"The material does not err": From the Bauhaus to Black Mountain

In a publicity statement delivered in 1923, founder Walter Gropius articulated a bold new vision for Bauhaus pedagogy, abandoning the school's earlier emphasis on craft as an artistic practice and reconceiving its workshops as a proving ground for industrial manufacture. "The old craft workshops will develop into industrial laboratories," Gropius proclaimed, creating a "new productive union" wherein the craftsman's engagement with the "entire process of production" was to supply an ideal model for industrial labor. For Gropius, the craftsman's intimate knowledge of his material uniquely equipped him to create well-crafted prototypes for industry, a belief that

[25] Quoted in Adamic, "Black Mountain," 633.
[26] Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 244. [emphasis in original]

transformed the Bauhaus, in effect, into one of the earliest schools of industrial design.[27]

Perhaps the most iconic of Bauhaus products, Marcel Breuer's tubular-steel chair, originated as just such a prototype, as did objects created in the pottery and furniture workshops, as well as Josef Albers's designs for bowls, teacups, and tables—all exquisitely "functional," to invoke a Bauhaus keyword.[28] As Virginia Gardner Troy notes, moreover, textile prototypes were one of the weaving workshop's "most significant innovations," with Anni Albers herself keenly attuned to the importance of aesthetic integrity in mass-produced domestic objects.[29] "Utility became a keynote of work, and with it the desire to reach a wider public," Albers wrote in "Weaving at the Bauhaus," describing "a desire to take part actively in contemporary life by contributing to the forms of its objects." For Anni—originally a student under Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, and subsequently director of the Bauhaus weaving workshop—craft objects were no "romantic attempt to recall a temps perdu," but a key stage in industrial manufacture.[30]

Integral to this process was the craftsman's immediate engagement with material, understood by Bauhäuslers as a way of sensitizing the craftsman to—or disciplining him with—influences beyond his control. Anni Albers's writing on design testifies powerfully to a Bauhaus craft ideal which balanced the worker's expressive labor with submission to materiality. "As the one who makes something from beginning to end and has it actually in hand," Albers wrote in "Designing," the craftsman "is close enough to the material and to the process of working it to be sensitive to the influences coming from these sources."

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[27] Walter Gropius, "The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus," in *Bauhaus 1919-1928*, eds. Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, Ise Gropius (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 25.

[28] See Achim Borchardt-Hume, "Two Bauhaus Histories," in *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From the Bauhaus to the New World* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 69 and Lucie-Smith, *The Story of Craft*, 252

[29] Virginia Gardner Troy, *The Modernist Textile: Europe and America, 1890-1940* (Burlington: Lund Humphries, 2006), 117.

[30] Anni Albers, "Weaving at the Bauhaus," the Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, accessed January 30, 2020, http://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/texts/. Anni Albers, "Handweaving Today: Textile Work at Black Mountain College," The Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, accessed June 10, 2019, http://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/texts/.

> His role today is that of the expounder of the interplay between them. He may also play the part of the conscience for the producer at large. It is a low voice, but one admonishing and directing rightly. For the craftsman, if he is a good listener, is told what to do by the material, and the material does not err.

Albers returns to this materialist ethos in her 1947 "Design: Anonymous and Timeless," in which she finds "direct experience of a medium" one of the primary "justification[s] for crafts today."

> For it means taking, for instance, the working material into the hand, learning by working it of its obedience and its resistance, its potency and its weakness, its charm and dullness. The material itself is full of suggestions for its use if we approach it unaggressively, receptively. It is a source of unending stimulation and advises us in [a] most unexpected manner.[31]

Though he wrote far less frequently than Anni, Josef Albers echoed his wife's line of thinking, warning that mass production was "doom[ed]" unless it found a way to incorporate "the best qualities of the crafts."[32] Neither artist, importantly, yet understood the craftsman's receptivity to materiality as a spiritual process; rather, respecting his material simply allowed the craftsman to produce a more aesthetically just object, one destined not for some transcendent plane of universal form but for mass production in the Weimar manufactory.

It was this industrial orientation that provoked widespread criticism from Bauhaus detractors, among them craft unionists and construction tradesmen who feared, perhaps justifiably, that Bauhaus influence on industry would reduce demand for their own craft labor.[33] Even more threatening to the Bauhaus, as Peter Hahn notes, was the "hostility of the same petit bourgeois elements that were the cradle of the Nazi movement," those spurned sons of the middle classes who would themselves have trained as craftsmen in previous eras, but who, under-employed in depression Weimar, agitated for and achieved the de-funding, barricading, and blacklisting of the

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31 Anni Albers, "Designing," in *Anni Albers: Selected Writings on Design*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 20. Anni Albers, "Design: Anonymous and Timeless," NP.

32 Quoted in Borchardt-Hume, "Two Bauhaus Histories," 69.

33 For more on resistance to the Bauhaus among German workers, see Hochman, *Bauhaus: Crucible of Modernism*, 193-200.

Bauhaus and its members.[34] As the Alberses fled Dessau for the United States—first to New York City and then to Black Mountain—they carried with them and transformed the Bauhaus emphasis on material engagement as preparation for industrial manufacture. In western North Carolina, however, they met with equal—if far less militant—opposition to the integration of craft and industry, challenged there by Appalachian craft revivalists who encouraged craftsmen to pursue complete independence from machine production.[35] Returning to craft in many cases as a matter of necessity, revivalist organizations like the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild no doubt balked at the opportunity to set their tables with Albers-designed placemats, as they could beginning in the 1940s, when the *New York Times* declared the hand-weaver "no arts-and-craftsy eccentric, but an important contributor to the march of industry."[36] Albers, for her part, looked with equal disregard on the Guild itself, heaping especial scorn on its preferred "overshot" weaving technique; Albers viewed such techniques as sentimental, arguing that relegating textile work to obsolete methods threatened its existence in the modern world. "Crafts," she jabbed, "have a place today beyond that of a backwoods subsidy."[37]

In fact, both Josef and Anni Albers had themselves begun to de-emphasize the importance of industrial manufacture in their craft pedagogies and practices. "Sometime between 1938 and 1959," Ta'i Smith explains of Anni Albers, she "began to rethink her tenure in the weaving workshop and the wider implications of that experience for her philosophy of education." In Smith's reading, Albers reconceives weaving at Black Mountain not as preparation for industry but as intellectual

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[34] Peter Hahn, *Exiles and Emigrés: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 213.

[35] For further discussion of the Appalachian crafts revival in western North Carolina see Lauria and Fenton, *Craft in America*, 16-20 and Troy, *Anni Albers*, 3-5.

[36] Quoted in Jennifer Scanlan, "Handmade Modernism: Craft in Industry in the Postwar Period," in *Crafting Modernism: Midcentury American Art and Design*, ed. Jeannine Falino (New York: Museum of Arts and Design, 2012), 102.

[37] Albers, "Handweaving…," NP. For more on Anni Albers's dispute with the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild, see Elissa Auther, "From Design for Production to Off-Loom Sculpture," in *Crafting Modernism: Midcentury American Art and Design*, ed. Jeannine Falino (New York: Museum of Arts and Design, 2012), 144-163. Anni Albers, "Constructing Textiles," in *Anni Albers: Selected Writings on Design*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 29.

training for broader service to American society. "[F]unctionalism in the weaving workshop was not a dead end of utility," Smith argues, "but a way of developing new capacities for understanding and rethinking the role of textiles in the modern world."[38] In contrast, Troy finds Albers refocusing on weaving for its own sake, contending that "Albers's interest in the utilitarian aspects of weaving diminished in favor of her pursuit of the artistic possibilities of weaving."[39] Both assessments seem plausible, but I also want to suggest that accompanying these changes was an increased interest in and sensitivity toward craft as a spiritual discipline, an interest shared by Josef and Anni alike. At Black Mountain College, the Alberses' Bauhaus ethic combined with the progressive values of founders Rice and Dreier—along with the ethos of the American Arts and Crafts movement—to produce a distinctly spiritualized craft ideal. And crucial to this ideal, as I've suggested, was the belief that the material resistances encountered in labor, including in craft workshops and the Black Mountain work program, allowed the craftsman to transcend his own egoistic experience.

Integrating European aesthetic theory with a characteristically American belief in the virtue of labor, the Black Mountain craft ideal reconstructs and transforms American Arts and Crafts ideology, a line of thinking which otherwise fractures during this period into opposed values within the 1930s Left. Black Mountain College reconciled those values by maintaining that the craftsman's material engagement allowed for freer, more authentic expression. At the same time, Black Mountaineers framed the craftsman's work—in the visual arts and poetry, with crop rotation and housing construction—as embodying formally a more universal order.

As I will show, that order began in Black Mountain workshops—with the Alberses' craft pedagogies, with pedagogical theory, and with their own creative practices.

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[38] Smith, *Bauhaus Weaving Theory*, 157, 158.
[39] Troy, *Anni Albers*, 4.

"*Ora et labora*": Toward a spiritualized craft ideal

In their flight from Nazi persecution, the Alberses and other ex-Bauhäuslers left behind certain craft values and practices incompatible with the institutions at which they landed, transposing other aspects of Bauhaus ideology into distinctly American practices. One of those practices was Josef Albers's *Werklehre* course at Black Mountain. Modeled after the preliminary course at the Bauhaus, *Werklehre*—along with Anni's weaving workshops—advocated immediate engagement with material as a means of freeing students for more creative ways of thinking: "thinking in situations," Josef called this learning. *Werklehre* itself stressed two basic forms of study as preliminary craft training: *matière* studies in the combinative possibilities of surface materials, and *material* studies in the structural properties underlying those materials.

The first, *matière* studies, prompted students to consider how things felt and how they looked like they felt, juxtaposing unlike materials in order to foreground discrepancies between physical fact and psychic effect. Combining grass and carpet swatches, light bulbs and cement, students' fiberboard-mounted assemblages aimed at a kind of textural *trompe l'oeil*, tricking the eye into perceiving similarities where none existed, what Josef termed a "*schwindel*."[40] Such visual defamiliarization figured prominently in other of Josef's pedagogical exercises, including students' creation of fluctuating figure-ground designs, their drawing of numbers and signatures in reverse, and color collages in which a hue was made to appear variously re-colored by juxtaposing, framing, or overlapping it with other colors, a technique Josef later employed in his iconic *Homage to the Square* series.[41] In her own workshops, Anni used similar experiments as an introduction to the surface qualities of textiles, scratching paper to make it appear fibrous, for example, or "achiev[ing] the

[40] Charles Darwent, *Josef Albers*, 213.

[41] For consideration of *matière* studies alongside the pedagogies of other avant-garde artists at Black Mountain, see Annette Jael Lehmann, "Pedagogical Practices and Models of Creativity at Black Mountain College," in *Black Mountain College: An Interdisciplinary Experiment: 1933-1957*, eds. Eugen Blume, Matilda Felix, Gabrile Knapstein, and Catherine Nichols (Berlin: Spector Books, 2015), 98-109.

appearance of fluffy wool using feathery seeds," a means of "revitalizing our tactile sense [before] dealing with real weaving."[42] Anni's version of *matière* studies also emphasized collage-like repetition of the same or similar elements; setting corn kernels in rows or arranging blades of grass into parallel columns, for instance, allowed for a uniformity in which natural irregularities made the plainest of surfaces come alive.[43]

While the Alberses *matière* studies focused on surface texture, *material* studies concerned the structural capacities of things, how assemblages such as paper mobiles, wooden furniture, and metal sculptures were put together and how their construction affected an object's flexibility, tension, contraction, and expansion. Josef was also interested in the structural principles underlying everyday objects, including pairs of scissors and the keystones of arches, instructing *Werklehre* students as to how properly to drive a nail into wood, for example, and to appreciate equally the integrity of Breuer's tubular chair and locally-made "Arts and Crafts-style" furniture.[44] Though *Werklehre* students did "not actually make useful things," as Josef admitted, the course was "not opposed to handicraft work but [was] its very foundation."[45] As such, the end of *material* studies was what the Black Mountain course catalogue—almost certainly written by Josef—referred to as "building-thinking," the ability, by attaining a "finger-tip feeling for material," to assess and master the relation between structure and function, form and feeling.[46]

The ultimate objective of both forms of study was what Josef called "mental unrest," to transform "productive seeing into creative revelation." To see "for instance grass only as an eatable

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[42] Anni Albers, "Tactile Sensibility," in *Anni Albers: Selected Writings on Design*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 71.

[43] See Briony Fer, "Black Mountain College Exercises," in *Anni Albers*, eds. Ann Coxon, riony Fer, and Maria Müller-Schareck (London: Tate, ND), 65.

[44] For further discussion of the Alberses' *material* studies, see Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), 76-79 and Horowitz and Danilowitz, *Josef Albers*, 73-129.

[45] Josef Albers, "Concerning Art Instruction," The Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, accessed June 10, 2019, http://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/texts/.

[46] "Course Outline," in *Black Mountain College: An Interdisciplinary Experiment: 1933-1957*, eds. Eugen Blume, Matilda Felix, Gabrile Knapstein, and Catherine Nichols (Berlin: Spector Books, 2015), 144. Albers, "Concerning…," NP.

vegetable," argued Josef, "that does every cow."

> But as soon as we see grass for instance as a carpet, or, as a fur, as an assemblage, or as a forest (suppose we have our eyes deeply enough in it), or when we see it as […] many and changing colors […] there enters the human being who naturally wants to be creative. […] Here comes the poet…[47]

Re-envisioning the material world as a vital assemblage allowed students to break down the scaffolding of habit and its tendency, as unthinking idiosyncrasy, to support expressive creation. "The aim of our art studies," Josef declared, "is not self-expression but articulation in visual form. Since [proper] expression is purposeful, aiming through selected means at definite effects, it is the result of self-control and mastery of medium."[48] For Anni, the resistance encountered in material engagement did not necessarily stifle expression but guided it, providing imagination "something to hold to" within the "immense welter of possibilities" available to the artist.[49] The Albersian craftsman worked against material in order to work with it.

Such pedagogical strategies were hardly unique to the Alberses, though their experimental pedagogy had more in common with first-wave or "Deweyan" progressive education than with those versions of the movement promoted by Black Mountain contemporaries. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey described artistic creation in terms strikingly similar to those used both by the Alberses and the erstwhile American Arts and Crafts Movement. "That which distinguishes an experience as aesthetic is conversion of resistance and tensions," Dewey wrote. "Things in the environment that would otherwise be mere smooth channels or else blind obstructions become means, media."[50] Like the Alberses, early progressive educators advocated immediate engagement with rudimentary materials, such as Friedrich Froebel's blocks, as a precursor to more advanced "occupations" such as clay modeling, slat-weaving with paper strips, and connecting dots within a gridded field. As a

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[47] Albers, "On Education…," NP. For Josef's elaboration of his re-training of perception, see Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

[48] Albers, "Art at Black Mountain College," The Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, accessed June 10, 2019, http://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/texts/.

[49] Albers, "Work with Materials," NP.

[50] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 58-63.

school teacher during the first decades of the twentieth century, Josef would have been familiar with these pedagogies, particularly insofar as the work of both Froebel and Johann Pestalozzi had been enjoying a resurgence of interest in Wilhelminian Germany.[51] Inherent in such thinking, however—as Albers well knew—was a tendency toward treating self-expression as an end in itself, with Froebel promoting children's and primitive art, for example, as legitimate artistic practices, and with subsequent educators championing freedom, spontaneity, and individuality in the progressive classroom. While Deweyan pedagogies aimed, like Bauhaus ideology, at the radical transformation of industrial production, reformers like Harold Rugg and Ann Shumaker of the Teachers College at Columbia Univnersity viewed the expressive artist as a Rousseauvian holdout against modern society, expanding one aspect of progressive education—its emphasis on expression—into the movement's *raison d'être*.[52] In contrast, the Alberses maintained that "children's work is essentially no art," as Josef put it, denying such work the quality of "intuitive forming" which marked the transition from primitive expression to a "more advanced drive […] for being productive," what the Alberses called "*Gestaltungstrieb*"—literally "impulse to form."[53]

Whether Anni's "meaningful form" or Josef's "articulation in visual form," aesthetic formalism played an integral role in the Alberses' spiritualization of both Bauhaus ideology and the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal, their belief that artistic creation—facilitated by fundamental craft pedagogies—participated in and made manifest a universal spiritual order. "As I see it, art today means more than technical ability or workmanship," Josef argued in 1940. "Art has become a word

[51] For more on Josef's career as a schoolteacher in Germany, see Horowitz and Danilowitz, 7-11.
[52] For Dewey's revolutionizing of industrial production, see Dewey, *Democracy in Education*, 188-198; Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 4-49; and Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Knopf, 1961), 183-207. For Rugg and Shumaker's expressive education, see Harold Rugg and Ann Shumaker, *The Child-Centered School: An Appraisal of the New Education* (New York: World Book Company, 1928).
[53] Albers, "On Education…," NP. Albers, *Interaction of Color*, 72.

for something more spiritual."[54] The textural and visual gestalt of floated wefts and triple-weave palimpsests, for example, or of nested squares and colored glass and fiberboard-mounted moss and chicken-wire assemblages, became a means of unlocking the "secret life of things," that occult-like order underlying—or immanent within—workaday realities.[55] "The organization of forms," Anni wrote, "their relatedness, their proportions, must have that quality of mystery that we know in nature." As nature revealed itself only incompletely, however—in the structure of shells and galaxies or the arrangement of seed heads or the pinnation of crystals—the role of aesthetics was to instantiate "a wholeness that we can comprehend," a higher order labored into material existence.[56] We might understand the Black Mountain craft object, therefore, as a holdover from that high-modernist utopian aspiration which Bill Brown finds embodied in the modernist "good object;" though Brown discusses modernist pottery like that of Herbert Read, his association of the good object with Bergsonian vitalism indicates its similarities with the theory and practice of craft at Black Mountain.

For the Alberses's effort to access some higher plane of existence was part of a wider contemporary interest in translating modernist process philosophy—in particular the thinking of Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead—into aesthetic form. Indeed, the Whiteheadian universe resembles closely those mobiles and assemblages constructed as part of the Alberses' *material* studies, with objects in the world—what Whitehead calls "actual entities"—interconnected in a vast network both with other entities and with "eternal objects" similar to Platonic forms. Since entities constantly "prehend" one another—the way, in today's "internet of things," thermostats and smartphones, servers and sprinkler systems signal and respond to each other—changes in one object redound throughout the entire network. More than cursory engagement with process philosophy is

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[54] Josef Albers, "The Meaning of Art," The Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, accessed January 27, 2020, http://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/texts/.
[55] Horowitz and Danilowitz, *Josef Albers*, 178.
[56] Anni Albers, "Designing as Visual Organization," 68.

beyond the scope of this chapter, but it bears mentioning that an interest in "process," especially the work of Bergson and Whitehead, characterized a number of otherwise irreconcilable avant gardes at Black Mountain College, including the performance art of summer teacher John Cage, whom the Alberses knew well, and the materialist poetics of poet Robert Duncan.[57] Describing what he called "the flux of things," Whitehead strikes a remarkably Albersian note, explaining that his materialist network "may be illustrated by our visual perception of a picture. The pattern of colors is 'given' for us. But an extra patch of red does not constitute a mere addition; it alters the whole balance."[58]

Like the Alberses', Whitehead's was a spiritual materialism. He believed that objects constantly seek their own apotheosis, prehending toward those universal "eternal objects" of which they are incomplete particulars. Seeking ever higher "gradations of intensity," objects can be aided in their intensification toward "satisfaction" by a greater degree of order in their immediate network. Order, in other words—what Whitehead variously calls "form" and "structure"—facilitates spiritual growth, in particular as it allows objects to convert what might prove "negative prehensions" or "*incompatibilities*" into orderly "*contrasts*."[59] The corollaries with Albersian aesthetic experience are evident. "Blue becomes more intense by reason of its contrasts," Whitehead writes, "and shape acquires dominance by reason of its loveliness."[60] For Whitehead as for the Alberses, moreover, the process of "intensification" constitutes a self-annulling experience, an object's "prehending" akin to the Black Mountain craft ideal in that it converts material resistances into spiritual thriving—"what was received as alien, has been recreated as private." An object's "completing" entailed "the perishing of immediacy," as Whitehead put it. "It never really is."[61] Student notes from Josef's *Werklehre* course suggest a very similar ethos. "Painting related to gambling," John Urbain wrote in

[57] For comparison between Cage and the Alberses, see Lehmann, "Pedagogical Practices…," 102-107.
[58] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929), 71.
[59] Ibid., 127-128. [emphasis in original]
[60] Ibid., 325.
[61] Ibid., 130.

1946—"use abandonment as the beginning of order."[62]

Copies of both Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932) and Whitehead's *Adventures of Ideas* (1933) could be found in the Black Mountain College library. But while the Alberses were familiar with Bergson's more influential *Matter and Memory* (1896)—and likely knew Whitehead's systematic masterwork *Process and Reality* (1929) as well—it is reasonable to surmise that they came independently to similar ideas about material resistance and spiritual order.[63] In the last days of the Bauhaus, as Nazi authorities froze faculty payments, padlocked the school's doors, and demanded family trees from students and teachers, Josef wrote to his friend Franz Perdekamp to inform him of developments in Dessau. "One will never hear Bach on the street again," he lamented on June 10, 1933. "Only [the popular German song] 'Püppchen du bist mein a Augenstern' or the like. Even if they dictated Wagner every day." As the nation descended into fascism, Josef "retreated to my little chamber [to] *ora et labora* alone."[64]

Prayer and labor—the Rule of Benedict serves as apt motto for the Alberses' spiritualized craft ideal. It was also a characteristically Albersian response, in the violent summer of 1933, to the very real material resistances in which—as the idiom holds—they found themselves.

<u>"The meditative icons of the twentieth century"</u>

Decrying the increasing purchase of fascism among the German masses—symbolized in the overthrow of Bach by "Baby, You Are the Star of My Eyes"—Josef found small comfort in the fact that the following day would be a holy day. "Pentecost remains," he wrote to Perdekamp, "and will remain, thank God."[65] The day must have been particularly meaningful to Albers, who as a devout

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62 Urbain, "Class notes…," NP.

63 See "Library catalog," Black Mountain Miscellaneous Collection, PC.1580 Box 1: NP, North Carolina Western Regional Archives.

64 Albers to Franz Perdekamp, June 10, 1933, in *Josef Albers: Interaction*, ed. Heinz Liesbrock (New Haven: Yale University Press, ND), 105-106.

65 Ibid., 106.

Catholic would have appreciated the resonance of Pentecost with his own artistic practice—the Apostles, hidden away for fear of violence, receiving the Holy Spirit through the breath of Christ, himself the ultimate in-forming of spirit in matter.

Throughout his tenure there, Albers was an almost daily communicant at the small Catholic church near Black Mountain, driving himself and painting instructor Jean Charlot to mass after breakfast and, through the rest of the day, conducting his own pedagogical and creative work with monastic discipline.[66] Charlot himself identified early the spiritual dimension of Albers's work, noting that it "longs for the state of repose as does a saint for unitive vision," an assessment Albers ratified in describing his effort to "create the silence of an icon." "That's what I'm after," Albers stated, "the meditative icons of the twentieth century."[67] That aspiration toward iconicity is evident even in Albers's earliest professional creations, assemblages made from shards of colored glass he had collected wandering the streets of Weimar, his repurposing of urban trash—a modernist trope, from Baudelaire's ragpicker to Woolf's "Solid Objects"—hardly lacking in Christological resonance. Called "*Scherbenbilder*" or "shard pictures" [*figs*. 3.1 and 3.2], the assemblages suggest the material incarnation of light in matter, their various colors, textures, and patterns unified in a single radiant body.

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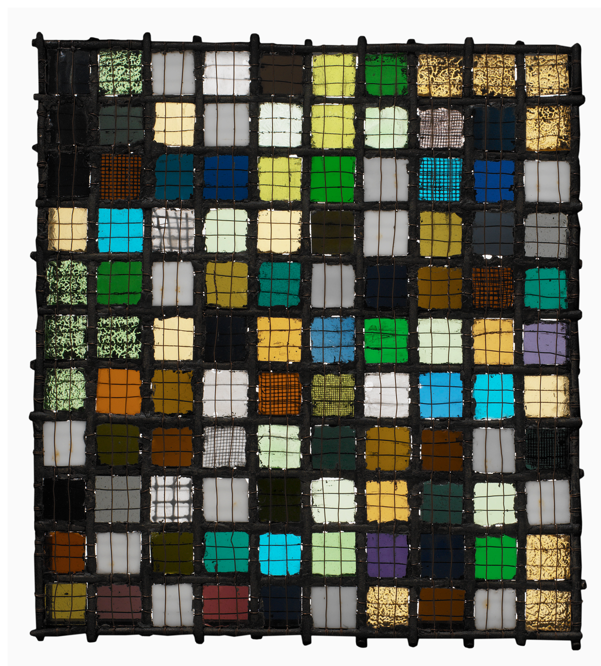
[66] For sustained discussion of Albers's Catholicism, see Charles Darwent, "From the Church to the Plaza: Josef Albers, Artist and Catholic," in *Josef Albers: Interaction*, ed. Heinz Liesbrock (New Haven: Yale University Press, ND), 230-239 and Darwent, *Josef Albers*, 254-259.

[67] Quoted in Darwent, *Josef Albers*, 257. Heinz Leisbrock, "The Spiritual Artist," in *Josef Albers: Interaction*, ed. Heinz Liesbrock (New Haven: Yale University Press, ND), 244.



[*fig.* 3.1] Josef Albers, *Gitterbild* (Grid Mounted), ca. 1921

[*fig.* 3.2] Josef Albers, *Scherben im Gitterbild* (Shards in Screens), ca. 1921

Albers's early glass works possess a vibrancy—even a personality, one is tempted to say—far less prominent in the abstract lithographs and engravings he created at Black Mountain, but his later "graphic tectonics" and "structural constellations" remain equally dedicated to manifesting spiritual order in formal relations. Invoking the De Stijl belief that a kind of cosmic beauty could be attained through abstraction and self-renunciation, Albers's mid-career works—produced from the late 1930s to early 1950s—share likewise in the "schwindel" of his *matière* exercises, tricking the eye in its depth perception and sense of spatial integrity, and evoking geometrically impossible dimensionalities through paradoxical overlappings and enigmatic planar arrangements. As his series of graphic tectonics makes especially clear, Albers's mid-career works also constitute critical studies in linearity, with variation in the weight of his lines—their thickness or thinness—suggesting three-dimensional volume, and with their vertiginous proximity making it difficult to discern precisely where one line ends and another begins. A "breathing line," Josef called these techniques, one of the more explicit links between the Alberses' work and Black Mountain field poetics originating, as Olson put it, in "certain laws and possibilities of the breath."[68] Titles like "Sanctuary" [*fig.* 3] and "To Monte Albán" [*fig.* 4] gesture to the spiritual aspiration of these tectonics, many inspired by the Alberses' frequent journeys to recently excavated pre-Columbian sites at Teotihuacán and Monte Albán, where researchers working under Mexican archaeologist Alfonso Caso had been unearthing vast complexes of temples and underground tombs since 1931.

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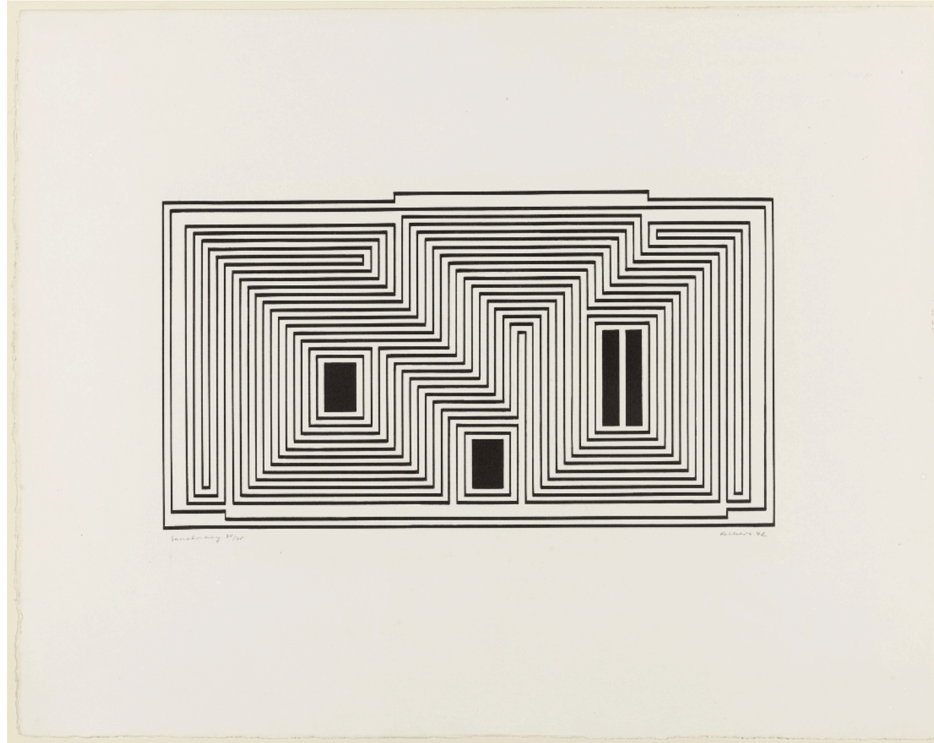
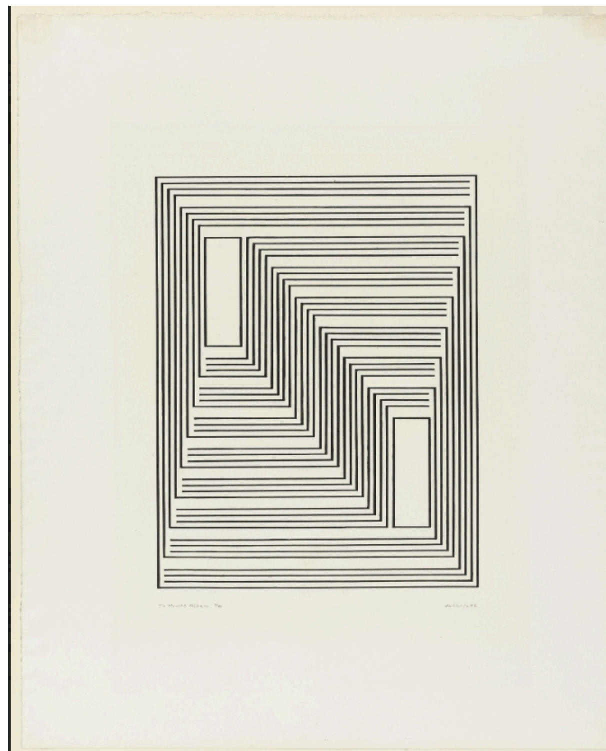
[68] Olson, "Projective Verse," 239. For more on Albers's "breathing line," see Horowitz and Danilowitz, *Josef Albers*, 154.



[*fig.* 3.3] Josef Albers, "Sanctuary," 1942.



[*fig.* 3.4] Josef Albers, "To Monte Albán," 1942

Though many of Albers's graphic tectonics possess an architectural quality in their resemblance to stepped pyramids, the spiritual dimension of these works is not representational but formal; constructed with ruler and drafting pen, executed by zinc-plate lithography, the tectonics achieve unity through asymmetrical balance, converting what Whitehead might call "negative prehensions" or "*incompatibilities*" into harmonized "*contrasts*." At the same time, lines that appear fragmentary or interrupted, as in "Sanctuary," do return to their points of origin, self-contained wholes nested within a larger order. Finally, it seems appropriate that the lithographs, after sustained attention, actually *hurt* us, straining our vision as the most familiar of aesthetic objects—lines and shapes and shadows—are rendered unfamiliar, wrenched into unstable configurations that force us to confront our own material limitations.[69]

That sense of resistance—an experience in this case not only of the artist or craftsman, but of the viewer whose vision strains to reconcile enigmatic realities—animates Albers's later "structural constellations" as well, floating, apparently multi-dimensional assemblages that seem to prompt viewers to spin or rotate them in order to decipher their mysteries. How, we find ourselves wondering, does this plane overlap that one? Where does this line recede and that one advance? Just which direction is up? Produced between 1949 and 1951 in a series called *Transformation of a Scheme*, Albers's structural constellations employ manipulations of depth, space, and linearity similar to those he had developed in his graphic tectonics; like those earlier works, the constellations flirt with the border between abstraction and symbolic reference, rewarding sustained attention with their formal verve and visual dynamism. The "breathing lines" of "Transformation of a Scheme No. 10" [*fig.* 3.5], for example, in addition to their almost material evocation of folded paper—as if these were origami pleats or the most intricately unfolded of cardboard boxes—seem to resemble pre-Columbian pictographs of insects, animals, and men dancing, while "Transformation of a Scheme

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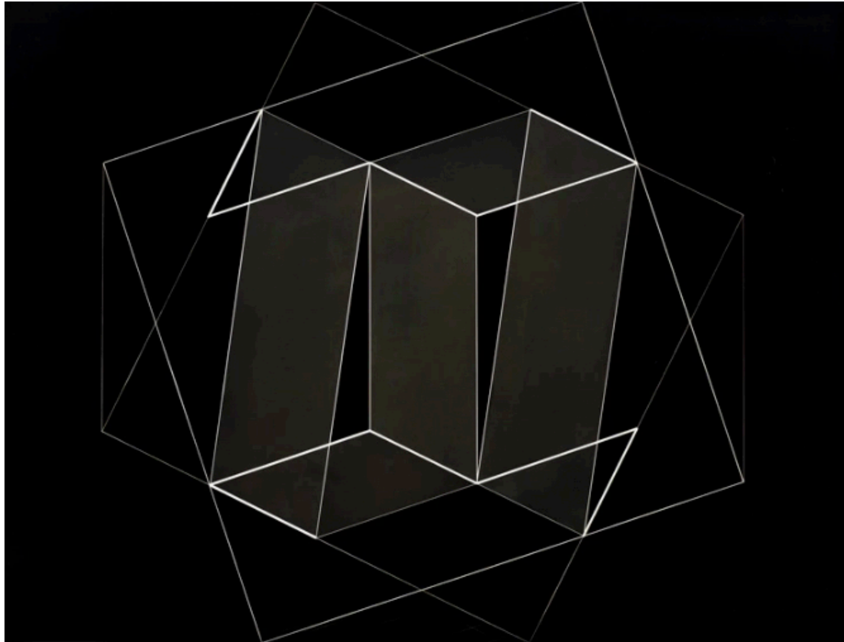
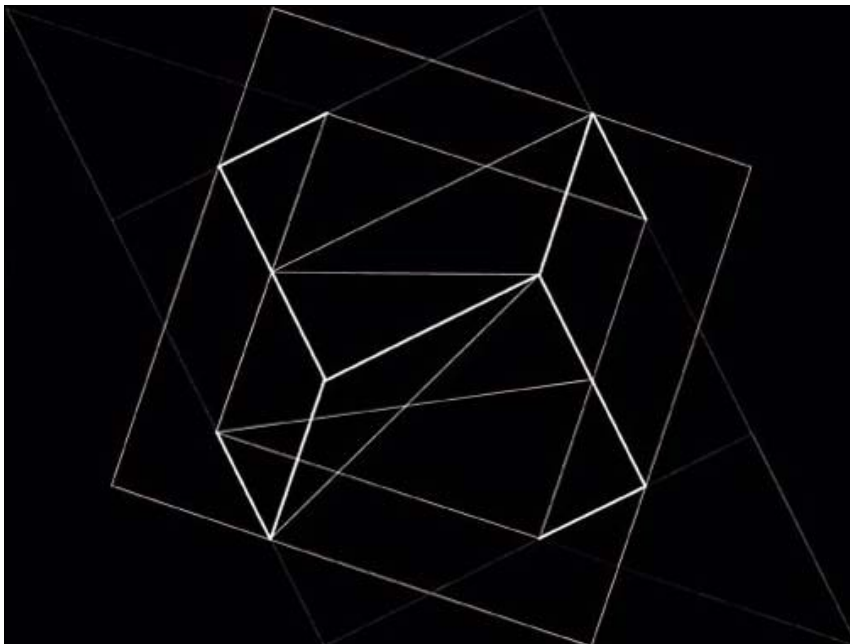
[69] For in-depth analysis of Albers's "graphic tectonics," especially *To Monte Albán*, see Irving Finkelstein, "Albers' 'Graphic Tectonics,'" *Form* 4 (April 15, 1967), 10-15.

No. 23" [*fig.* 3.6] suggests to my eye both a deconstructed swastika and the evolution of the human species, some limbed figure wheeling itself into upright position.



[*fig.* 3.5] Josef Albers, "*Transformation of a Scheme* No. 10," 1950



[*fig.* 3.6] Josef Albers, "*Transformation of a Scheme* No. 23," 1950

The planar transparency in both works, moreover, ultimately proves deceptive, since the promise of "seeing through" the figures serves only further to disorient us—transparency as opacity, we might say. And while there seems clear delineation, in "No. 23," between the work's tilted square frame and the more angular geometries at the center of the piece, it remains difficult to discern whether those geometries are sinking into or emerging out of the portal the frame creates.[70] "Constellation" seems an apposite title for these works, then, since constellations themselves represent human attempts to translate distant points of light into flat planes possessed of universal symbolic meaning. "Bear," we say, or "swan" or "archer" or "eagle," and suddenly the cosmos comes alive for us. Suddenly we understand, as we say, our place in things. For Albers, the point of the structural constellations was not for viewers to see through to some resolution, but to hold irreconcilable realities in mind at the same time, to conceive those realities as paradox and potential, and in so doing to consider material resistances as egress onto spirit. Josef would have been familiar with such spiritualism—"this is my body," the Catholic priest declares, and bread becomes the savior of the world.

In a similar way, Anni's textile work during and immediately after her Black Mountain period dedicates itself to the in-forming of spirit in matter, invoking visual and textual abstraction, as well as material resistance, as avenues not only toward freer, more authentic expression, but toward planes of existence normally foreclosed to human experience. Joining De Stijl-like visual vocabularies with Constructivist attention to textile structure, Albers's work was consistent with a wider modernist emphasis on medium specificity, returning attention to the foundational horizontal and vertical intersections which, as Albers believed, elicited the weaver's freest expression. "The more clearly this original formation is preserved or stressed in the design," Albers wrote, "the stronger the

[70] For further discussion of Albers's *Transformation of a Scheme* series, see Jeannette Redensek, "*Farbenfabeln*: On the Origins and Development of the 'Homage to the Square,' in *Josef Albers: Interaction*, ed. Heinz Liesbrock (New Haven: Yale University Press, ND), 173-174 and "The Interaction of Color: Op Art," in *Bauhaus and America: Experiments in Light and Movement* (Berlin: LWL Kerber Art, 2019), 156.

weaving will be in those characteristics that set it apart from other techniques."[71] Albers's weaving de-prioritized representation, therefore, in order to foreground the possibilities made available through the basic constraints of her material, to "let threads be articulate again."[72] In addition to integrating new synthetic fibers like rayon and cellophane, Albers pioneered innovative double-, triple-, and open-weave structures, layering distinct planes with their own warps and wefts on top of one another and interlocking, pulling away, sectioning, pocketing, puckering, or flattening these planes to create three-dimensional surfaces.[73]

So-called "structural" weaving had first been developed by Andean weavers in pre-Columbian South America, a period and form of craftsmanship studied with renewed interest in the first half of the twentieth century, when European artists looked to "primitive" cultures for more authentic, spiritually unadulterated forms of production. Abstract and handmade, Andean weaves were Gothic cathedrals, products of integrated societies in which craft labor remained both expressive and technically rigorous, fulfilling and faithful. Albers knew these cultures well. As Troy notes, she owned and consulted Max Schmidt's influential *Kunst und Kultur von Peru*—which her family's company, Ullstein Verlag, had published in 1929—and would have visited the collection of Andean textiles on display at the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde in 1907, the largest collection of Andean work ever exhibited.[74] After her move to Black Mountain, moreover, Albers made almost yearly treks to sites of similar pre-Columbian cultures in Oaxaca, like her husband incorporating abstracted Zapotec architectures into her textiles, most prominently in her 1936 wall-hanging *Monte Albán*.

Woven from silk, linen, and wool, *Monte Albán* [*fig.* 3.7] marks one of Albers's earliest uses of supplementary-weft brocade, what weavers refer to as a "floating" weft for the way its second,

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[71] Anni Albers, *On Weaving* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), 38.

[72] Quoted in Ann Coxon and Maria Müller-Schareck, "Anni Albers: A Many-Sided Artist," in *Anni Albers*, eds. Ann Coxon, Briony Fer, and Maria Müller-Schareck (London: Tate, ND), 13. For Albers's objection to the Raphael Cartoons, see Albers, *On Weaving*, 68.

[73] My description of Albers's weaving techniques is especially informed by Troy, *The Modernist Textile*, 120-122.

[74] For more on Albers's interest in Andean weaving, see Troy, *Anni Albers*, 1 -12 and 30-39.

superficial weft "floats" above—traverses, interlocks with, loops across—the work's primary or foundational weft, allowing the weaver to inscribe independent motifs on the weaving surface.

[*fig.* 3.7] Anni Albers, "Monte Albán," 1936

In the case of *Monte Albán*, those motifs evoke the temples and terraces, the vast plazas and cramped burial vaults of Zapotec civilization, the wall-hanging a kind of x-ray or cross-section of Monte Albán's archaeological strata.[75] Because floating wefts serve no structural purpose—one can pull them out without compromising a textile's integrity—and because they function as a form of textural inscription, works like *Monte Albán* mark a departure from Albers's earlier insistence on abstraction and medium specificity, re-articulating textiles as quasi-literary "texts" or, as Albers

[75] For descriptions of the kind of inscribing made possible through "floating" wefts, see Maria Minera, "Discovering Monte Albán," in *Anni Albers*, eds. Ann Coxon, Briony Fer, and Maria Müller-Schareck (London: Tate, ND), 74-85 and Troy, *Anni Albers*, 117-121.

herself called them, "pictorial weavings."[76] Like her husband, Albers flirts in many of these weavings and wall-hangings with the line between representation and abstraction, her work increasingly script-like as Albers endeavors to manifest in material form what often seem like encrypted or occult languages. Her 1936 triple weave *Ancient Writing* [*fig.* 3.8], for example, made from cotton and rayon, reads like a redacted transcript of some sacred text, its geometric windows a sort of "Bible code" opening onto another reality.

[*fig.* 3.8] Anni Albers, "Ancient Writing," 1936

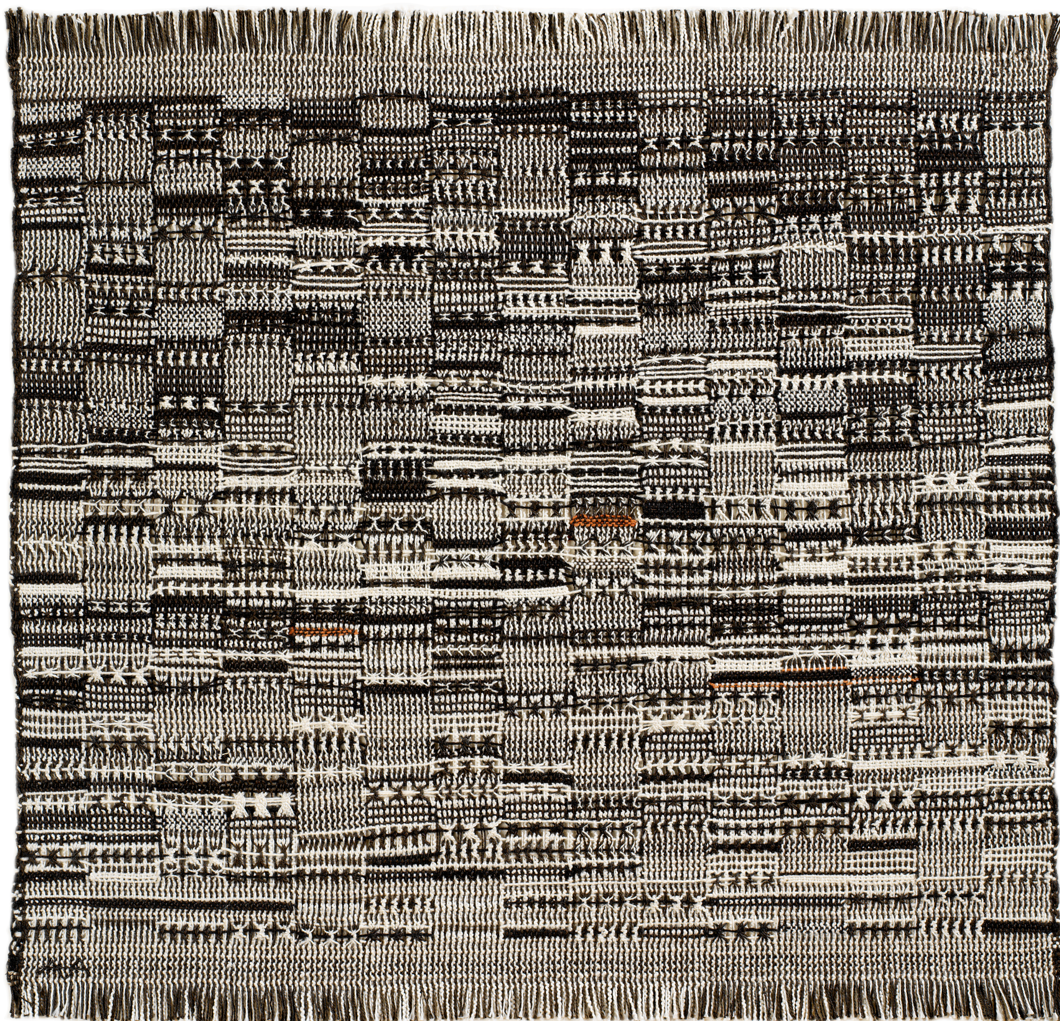
[76] For further discussion of Albers's medium specificity and her move from abstract to pictorial weaving, see Smith, *Bauhaus Weaving Theory*, 41-78.

Likewise, both *Haiku* [*fig.* 3.9] and *Code* [*fig.* 3.10] gesture toward an indecipherable mystery just beyond our ken, an alien language garbled in transmission so that, as we scan what appear as musical scores or Morse code, we apprehend only abstractly that whole of which these texts are a part.

[*fig.* 3.9] Anni Albers, "Haiku," 1961

[*fig.* 3.10] Anni Albers, “Code,” 1962

Albers’s texts, that is, ask us to accept materiality as our sole point of access to a universal order beyond the expressive self. Most striking among such texts is her 1958 weaving *Open Letter* [*fig.* 11], an open weave in black and white cotton which reveals on close inspection several orange supplementary wefts floated across the weave proper.



[*fig.* 3.11] Anni Albers, "Open Letter," 1958

With multiple warps twisted together by hand, the weaving is virtuosic craftsmanship, its braids highly controlled but also remarkably various in pattern, arrangement, and color, instantiating that craft ideal at the heart of the Alberses' work. Like *Haiku* and *Code*, *Open Letter* evokes a communication scrambled in transmission, the static through which—just dimly, as on the premium channels of yore—one perceives the shadows and outlines of forms in relation, figures screened both for and from us. That the text is "open," however, suggests that it hides nothing, that it is itself the presence to which it points—the work conveys not information, but an in-formation.

Such an assumption was integral to the Alberses' craft pedagogy and artistic practices at Black Mountain College, just as it was integral, I will show, to those Black Mountaineers who worked alongside and after them, from the carpenters and field hands of the work program to the "significant craft" of poet and creative writing teacher Robert Duncan. Indeed, Duncan might have been thinking of Albers's *Open Letter* when he wrote, in an essay called "Towards an Open Universe," that "[e]ach poet seeks to commune with creation, with the divine world; that is to say, he seeks the most *real* form in language." That real form, though, was "something we [only] apprehend; the poem, the creation of the poem, is itself our primary experience of it."[77]

"Open form," Duncan would call this kind of poem—"field poetics." And among its other evocations, *Open Letter* recalls, I think, a patchwork grid of fields and farmland as seen from above, those vast agricultural geometries that sustain us, those verses we turn and turn.

II. The Black Mountain Work Program

"The rhythm of swinging machetes": Work as spirit

Two days after returning to Black Mountain College in the fall of 1947, second-year student Harry Weitzer found himself drafted into labor on the college farm, tasked with cutting and storing silage for use as fodder during the winter ahead. "I ended up with a corn knife in hand, and not too long after, blisters," Weitzer described. "Cut, cut, cut, gather a shoulderfull of the stalks before they fell, and turn them as a bundle out of the row for the wagon crew to pick up." Prolific in the school's woodworking shop, Weitzer would go on to a nationally distinguished career as a furniture designer and master woodworker in the Pacific Northwest, his elegant, bent-wood lighting fixtures—quintessential "mid-century modern"—neatly embodying that Black Mountain synthesis

[77] Robert Duncan, "Towards an Open Universe," in *Collected Essays and Other Prose*, ed. James Maynard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 129.

of spirit and matter so conspicuous in Josef Albers's "structural constellations" and in Anni's "pictorial weavings." Weitzer's description of farm work testifies too to Black Mountain's spiritualization of an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal, the channeling of expression through material resistances in order not only to attain freer, more authentic expression but to access that universal spiritual order underlying everyday experience. "What lovely work," Weitzer exclaimed in his memoir. "Ah, the sweet hot smell of corn juices, the just fatigue of honest work. […] Then, we were in the silo under a shower of corn stomping it down, round and round surrounded by a head-spinning smell just a little better than Bourbon." Reminiscent of Sufi dervishes—as well as the more Transcendental-like experiments of the American Arts and Crafts movement—Weitzer's reverie suggests that at Black Mountain craft was a spiritual discipline, a way of subordinating ego to an order resident in even the most unassuming of material. As Weitzer put it, "we learned about more than hay that day."[78]

Farm work was only one aspect of the work program at Black Mountain, where students could fulfill their work requirement by patching roads and cleaning dishes, preparing and serving at community meals, sweeping, felling trees, and maintaining buildings, or with more "craft-like" tasks such as constructing furniture and weaving curtains and floor coverings. Though understood as a substitute for intercollegiate athletics, Black Mountain's work program was hardly extracurricular, given how closely integrated it was with art, architecture, and weaving courses, and its counting equally as credit toward graduation.[79] "As they do in craft work," wrote architecture teacher Lawrence Kocher, students in the work program "may learn that materials have limitations and laws

[78] Harry Weitzer, Memoir, Black Mountain College Project Collection, PC.7008, Box 16: NP, North Carolina Western Regional Archives.
[79] "Newsletter Number 11 (February, 1941)," Black Mountain College Project Collection, PC.7008, Box 1: NP, North Carolina Western Regional Archives.

of their own and that working with them requires discipline and technique."[80] In an interview in 1965, Josef Albers similarly positions the program as coextensive with other forms of learning:

> I thought carpentry is a very wonderful handicraft—with the most material considered. When they made bookshelves—the boys—they […] put the nails through the vertical board into the horizontal board. That's the greatest nonsense when it comes to carpentry, because the nails go parallel into the long grain. It falls apart. The nail has to go across the direction of the grain. […] I made them 'steal' with the eyes. We had a carpenter from Black Mountain come up once a week to show them what means: thinking in wood.

Albers's catchphrase—"thinking in wood"—is powerful shorthand for the necessity across art, craft, and work practices of attuning oneself to and respecting one's materials. Testifying equally to the continuity across these practices is the order form submitted to student Frank Rice in his capacity as supply manager of the college kitchen [*figs.* 3.12 and 3.13]—on one side of the form a modest order for eggs and fruit, on the other Rice's notes on "graded weaves" from Anni's workshop, including a note to "make a double weave twill," no doubt the more difficult of the form's tasks.[81]

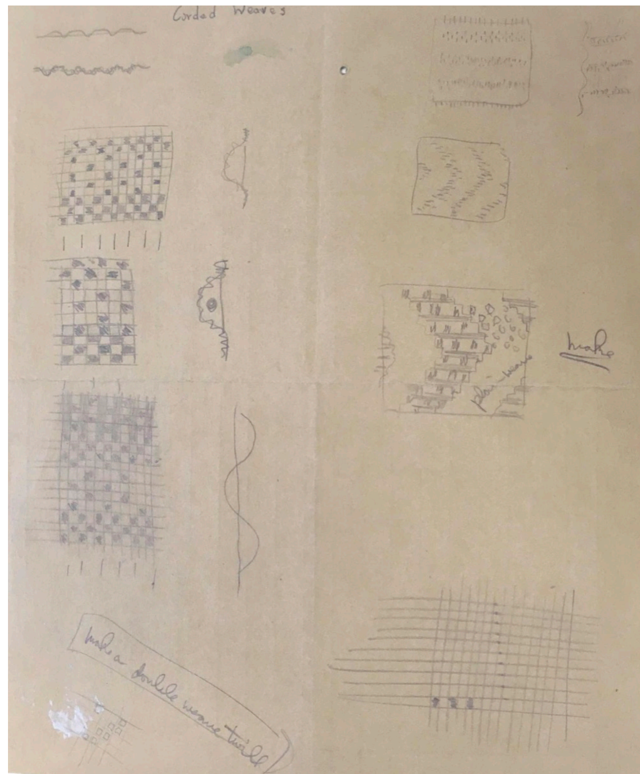
BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE — BLACK MOUNTAIN, NORTH CAROLINA
KITCHEN ORDER BLANK
To: Rice
No. K 956
All packages and invoices must show this number.
Date May 11
Date required
Ship via.
Kindly enter and acknowledge our order for the following merchandise.

QUANTITY	DESCRIPTION	WEIGHT	UNIT PRICE	TOTAL
	4 eggs			
	6 oranges			
	1 grapefruit			

The Corporation of Black Mountain College — by

[*fig.* 3.12] Frank Rice, Kitchen order blank (side 1)

[80] Lawrence Alfred Kocher, "The Building Project and Work Program," Black Mountain College Research Project, Series VI, Box 75: NP, North Carolina Western Regional Archives.
[81] Frank Rice, Kitchen form, Black Mountain College Project Collection, PC.7008, Box 20: NP, North Carolina Western Regional Archives.



[*fig.* 3.13] Frank Rice, Kitchen order blank (side 2)

The integration of work into academic learning was a hallmark, of course, of Deweyan progressive education, in which an activity like weaving was seen simultaneously as artistic expression, craft labor, and vital preparation for the world of industry. In his effort to make labor "intellectually fruitful," Dewey held that the "only adequate training *for* occupations is training *through* occupations," incorporating farming, gardening, cooking, construction, and book-binding into progressive curricula and, like the Alberses, promoting foundational craft skills like folding, cutting, molding, modeling, and pattern-making.[82] In the contemporaneous "manual training" movement, moreover—an offshoot of progressive education proper—educators like Calvin M. Woodward of the Manual Training School in St. Louis joined mental and manual labor by combining courses in mathematics, science, language, and literature with instruction in carpentry, forge work, brazing,

[82] Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 264, 298. [emphasis in original]

soldering, iron chipping, and other semi-industrial occupations, all intended, like the program at Black Mountain, more as liberal than vocational education.[83] Equally invested in labor as a spiritual discipline was the antebellum "manual labor" movement inspired by onetime Pestalozzi-collaborator Philipp Emanuel von Fellenberg. Combining classical education with up to four hours per day of agricultural and mechanical work, manual labor schools like Oberlin and Kenyon sought, as one account of von Fellenberg's Hofwil schools put it, to "unit[e] with useful labor those amusements which unbend the minds and gladden the hearts of youth."[84] Black Mountain's own work program was dedicated, in the words of program coordinator Dreier, to "showing how the liberal arts can be revitalized by being again more intimately related to the rest of life," an objective achieved among other ways by clearing time for work in the exact middle of the day, between morning and evening classes. Invoking Whitehead's comment that in contemporary society "the kings are the plain citizens pursuing their various avocations," Dreier argued that "the plain citizen or the common man is a working man and his philosophy, among other things, has got to be connected with and make sense out of his work."[85]

For Dreier, making sense of work meant appreciating its spiritual potential. "What is your height?," Dreier asked in a questionnaire for work program participants. "How much do you weigh? How do you feel the next day as a result of your work at Lake Eden, especially is there a carry-over of your spiritual moods or physical well-being?"[86] Among other influences, Dreier would have acquired such spiritualism from his close friendship with the Alberses, having accompanied the

[83] For detailed discussion of the manual training movement, see Cremin, *The Transformation*, 25-34.

[84] "M. Fellenberg's Establishment at Hofwyl in Switzerland," *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, March 28, 1837: 4. For more on the manual labor movement see Herbert Galen Lull, *The Manual Labor Movement in the United States* (Seattle: Bulletin of the University of Washington, 1914), 375-387 and Stephen P. Rice, *Minding the Machine: Language of Class in Early Industrial America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 67-85.

[85] Theodore Dreier, "The Question of Evaluating Community Work at Black Mountain College," in Theodore and Barbara Loines Dreier Black Mountain College Collection, PC.1956, Box 38: 3, North Carolina Western Regional Archives.

[86] Theodore Dreier, "Revised Draft of Questionnaire about Lake Eden Work Program," in Theodore and Barbara Loines Dreier Black Mountain College Collection, PC.1956, Box 38: NP, North Carolina Western Regional Archives.

couple, along with his wife Bobbie, on those trips to Oaxaca that proved so formative for the Alberses' own work. Dreier was also the nephew of Duchamp patron and Bauhaus supporter Katherine S. Dreier, a leading promoter of modernist art who organized the Cooperative Mural Workshops inspired by the Armory Show and facilitated one-man exhibitions for Kandinsky in 1923 and Klee in 1924, well before the height of their popularity.[87] Dreier's interest in the spiritualism of labor, this is to say—as many *did* say—was in part the distant and enlightened spiritualism of one who has never labored for a living. "Ted had this notion," mused Black Mountain co-founder John Andrew Rice, "having been born in Brooklyn Heights, and never having seen more than a few blades of grass, that there was some kind of mystical experience in touching the soil." Rice himself had grown up among Southern farmers compelled to endure the miserable work of picking cotton by hand, repetitive, often injurious labor—to pick a cotton boll one brings all four fingers to the thumb—that left Rice's neighbors and relatives exhausted both physically and mentally. "Untoiling poets may sing of the dignity of toil," Rice wrote, but "others know there is degradation in obligatory sweat."[88] Nonetheless, Dreier proved no mere "untoiling poet" but an indefatigable worker and teacher throughout his leadership of the work program, visible in myriad archival photos leading and instructing students in their work [*fig*. 3.14].

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[87] For Katherine S. Dreier's instrumental role in bringing modernism to the U.S., see especially Margret Kentgens-Craig, *The Bauhaus and America: First Contacts 1919-1936* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 68-81.
[88] Quoted in Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 42-43.

[*fig.* 3.14] Thedore Dreier leading construction on the Studies Building foundation, 1940

The centerpiece of Dreier's tenure as head of the work program—indeed, the most important event in Black Mountain history, excepting, perhaps, John Cage's legendary 1952 "happening"—was the construction from September, 1940 to April, 1942 of a three-story Studies Building out of stone and lumber sourced from college property. Intended to house 59 student and 12 faculty studies, two faculty apartments, and an unfinished ground-floor space for art classes and weaving workshops, the Studies Building was to be a paragon of Bauhaus modernism, designer and architect teacher Kocher having worked closely with original plans drawn up by Marcel Breuer and Walter Gropius. The influence of Breuer and Gropius is conspicuous in continuous steel-sash windows that run the length of the building and in its simple corrugated facing made from modular transite panels, giving the building the distinctive linearity and clean abstraction of Bauhaus architecture [*figs.*

3.15 and 3.16].[89]

[*fig.* 3.15] Studies Building under construction, 1941

[*fig.* 3.16] Studies Building completed

[89] For technical specifications of the Studies Building, see Harris, *The Arts*, 60 and Matilda Felix, "Constructing Experience: Architecture at Black Mountain College," in *Black Mountain College: An Interdisciplinary Experiment: 1933-1957*, eds. Eugen Blume, Matilda Felix, Gabrile Knapstein, and Catherine Nichols (Berlin: Spector Books, 2015), 196-207.

Strikingly futuristic, even alien, nestled among the hills and gently rolling fields of western North Carolina, the building's "cleanliness" belies the extent of the material resistances—from financial to foundational instability—that confronted Kocher, Dreier, and other Studies Building workers. If the Black Mountain catalogue for 1940-41 positioned the project as offering "specific laboratory problems for students in the Architecture and Art courses," those problems were many and immediate, including the calamitous re-routing of a mountain stream crossing the proposed site and, soon after, the discovery that a layer of loose mud underlay the entire area, requiring the driving of piles to solid substrate.[90] As Dreier explains, rather than contract a local pile-driving company for the work—at a cost the school could hardly afford—he endeavored with construction manager Charles Godfrey to rig up a homemade pile-driving machine that they could power with their Farmall tractor [*fig.* 3.17].

[*fig.* 3.17] Dreier and Charles Godfrey's tractor-powered pile-driver, 1940

[90] Quoted in Felix, "Constructing Experience," 203.

"He proposed to cut a 500-pound black-gum log," Dreier writes, "haul it to the top of the twenty-seven-foot tower with a steel cable that could be wound up on a wide-flanged steel pulley […] on the tractor's power drive." Throwing out the tractor's clutch to release the pulley, Dreier and Godfrey watched the log plummet three stories on vertical tracks, a distance "Charlie was sure would be enough to drive any piles that we had to drive," as indeed it proved.[91] Dreier does not quite invoke the spiritualism of labor here, but his account does resonate with Albersian craft pedagogies geared, as *matière* and *material* studies were, toward promoting creativity through material experience, literally embodying what Josef had called "thinking in wood." "Not only the buildings," declared Dreier, "but the design and experience of constructing them were in a very fundamental sense works of art."[92] Initial difficulties overcome, work on the Studies Building proceeded at a blistering pace, with the Black Mountain community celebrating a "topping out" ceremony—an ancient Scandinavian rite meant to appease tree-spirits displaced in construction—as the last beam was lowered into place just before Christmas, 1940.

Assisting Dreier throughout that tumultuous first year was German exile Richard Gothe, an economics Ph.D. and master mechanic hired by Albers to assemble and coordinate teams of student laborers. Gothe was well qualified for the work. Prior to Hitler's rise to power, he had been actively involved in the popular "work camp" movement in the Weimar Republic, work he had continued in the U.S. as secretary of the Work Camps for America. As in Weimar Germany, American work camps were intended not only as a means of ameliorating Depression-era unemployment, but as a program for teaching cooperative living, fostering community relations, and instructing American youth in constructive and non-violent problem-solving—in short, as a way of espousing "the

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[91] Quoted in Mervin Lane, ed. *Black Mountain College: Sprouted Seeds, an Anthology of Personal Accounts* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 31. Dreier recounts the story in similar fashion in a 1946 letter to Earlene Wight. See Ted Dreier, "Letter to Earlier Wight, March 21, 1946," in in *Black Mountain College: An Interdisciplinary Experiment: 1933-1957*, eds. Eugen Blume, Matilda Felix, Gabrile Knapstein, and Catherine Nichols (Berlin: Spector Books, 2015), 210-214.

[92] Quoted in Lane, *Black Mountain College*, 32.

importance of 'work' in a philosophy of life and service."[93] It is easy to overlook the popularity of work camps among American youth of the 1930s and 40s, overshadowed as they were by an array of New Deal programming—and subsequent critical scholarship—focused on adult education and employment. Work camps, though, were wildly popular during this period, organized in almost every state and offering myriad experiences to those interested, from hauling coal in the anthracite fields of Pennsylvania and West Virginia to harvesting crops among migratory workers in Washington to urban labor projects in Chicago and New York.[94] In addition to those camps organized by Work Camps for America, the camps of the American Friends Service Committee, sponsored by the Quakers, were a common destination for American young people, offering, as one camper put it, that "sense of integration and purpose" so conspicuously absent elsewhere.[95] Gothe would have been familiar with these camps, and Dreier, we know, viewed them as laudable models for the work program at Black Mountain, oriented as Quaker camps were toward opening participants "to the springs of creative love that expand [their] frame of meaning, that draw, gather, and refocus [their] partial purposes and relate them to the very grain of things, to the creative life of God himself."[96] Though more explicitly Christian than Black Mountain's spiritualized craft ideal, Quaker camps likewise promoted sublimation of the ego in labor, one pamphlet describing campers' "personal claimful demands melting down and a new and living sense of fellowship with, and responsibility for, the wider community springing up." "Corporate contemplation," another pamphlet in Dreier's papers called it, and the practice was integral not only to Quaker camps in Reading, Pennsylvania and Delano, California, but to the entire Black Mountain craft ideal, from the

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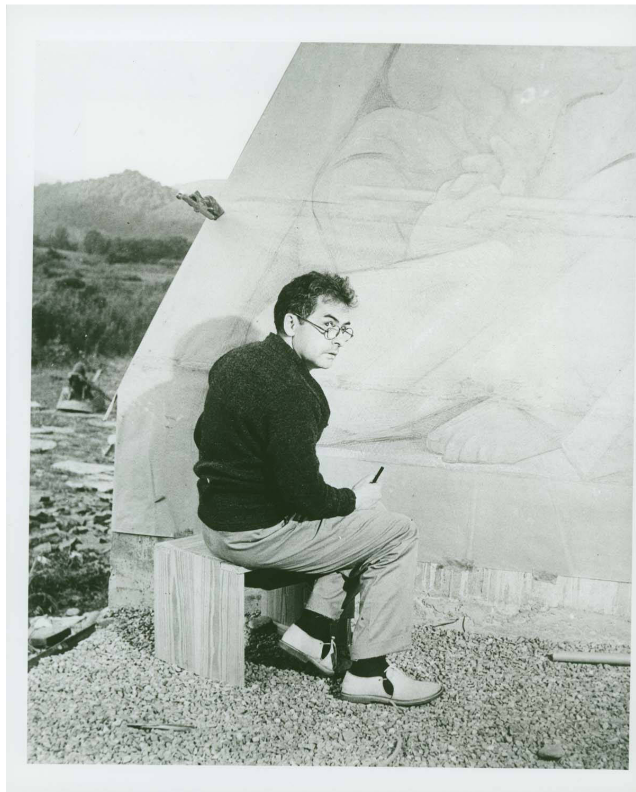
[93] American Friends Service Committee. *Work Camps* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1941), NP.
[94] For detailed consideration of the work camp movement, see Osgood Nichols and Kurt Glaser, *Work Camps for America: The German Experience and the American Opportunity* (New York: The John Day Company, 1933).
[95] American Friends Service Committee, *Work Camps*, NP.
[96] Douglas V. Steere, "Work and Contemplation," in Theodore and Barbara Loines Dreier Black Mountain College Collection, PC.1956, Box 39: NP, North Carolina Western Regional Archives.

Alberses' craft pedagogy and artistic practices to summer work camps the school itself organized in an effort to finish the Studies Building on time and under budget.[97]

At the same time that traditional Black Mountain summer students were performing Bach concertos and staging Satie, work campers from Black Mountain and other schools were roofing, insulating, and wiring the Studies Building, quarrying and stacking stones into landscaping walls, and creating frescoes [*fig.* 3.18] for the wide structural supports underneath the building, work overseen by painting instructor Charlot.



[*fig.* 3.18] Jean Charlot at work on frescos on Studies Building support beams, ca. 1941-42

That many of these students came from elite Eastern institutions including Harvard, Princeton, and Sarah Lawrence suggests that their work was not merely a matter of necessity, that some other,

[97] Ibid., NP.

perhaps more spiritual purpose had driven them to the wilds of rural North Carolina. Comments from work campers and Black Mountain students and faculty bear out Dreier's conviction that the material resistances of labor constituted a form of spiritual discipline. Asked on his exam for matriculation into the Senior Division "What is work [and] what is play?," Jimmie Jamieson went on for several typewritten pages before concluding with a five-word summary: "Work is play, and vice-versa."[98] In a letter to her friend, lecturer May Sarton writes with exuberance of Black Mountain communal labor. "Rosalind, it is a great sight to see the trucks go down the mountains every afternoon filled with teachers and students, boys and girls," Sarton wrote.

> It is something hard to describe in words to watch Straus, the ex-German psychiatrist with a wonderful head of white hair throwing rocks to a young girl who throws them to a boy who sets them in the wall which others have prepared with a bed of cement. I helped on the wall one afternoon and felt happier at the end, more whole and ready for *thought* than I have in years.[99]

Summer student Ruth Lyford Sussler likewise recalled her fresco work under Charlot with the reverence of childhood reminiscence, comparing fresco work to "cutting cornstalks in the field for silage." "The flow of energy that bristled from this gathering of souls was powerful," Sussler admitted.

> The day's work swallowed you up, carried you along in the rhythm of swinging machetes. […] The excitement and energy released in this ritual of harvesting the corn gave magic to the hard physical labor taking place in the hot sun, making the work seem effortless. The importance of community manual labor as a balance to solitary thinking and artistic effort could be well understood.[100]

No less powerfully than these recollections, archival photos from the work program suggest the extent to which labor functioned as spiritual discipline at Black Mountain, with students engaged in their work as if moved by and toward some higher order, as many professed to be [*figs*. 3.19-3.23].

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[98] Jimmie Jamieson, "Senior Division Examination," in Black Mountain College Project Collection, PC.7008, Box 6: NP, North Carolina Western Regional Archives.

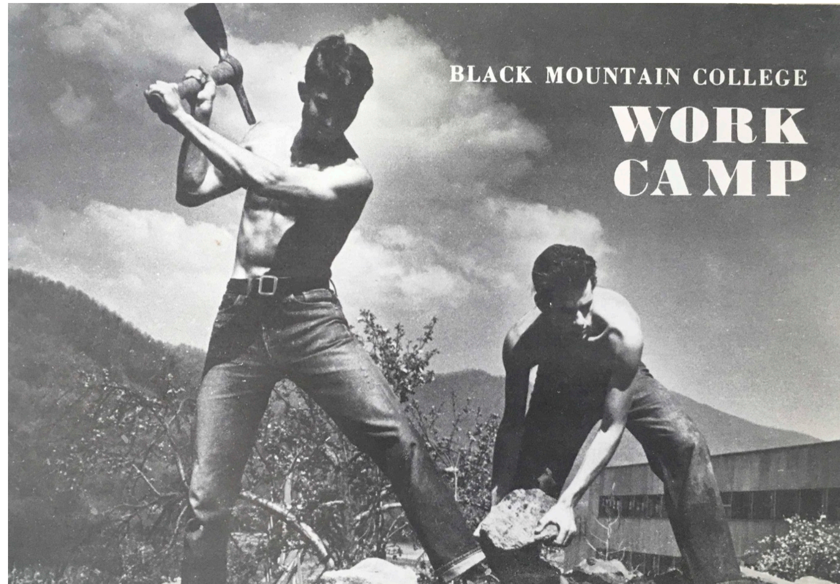
[99] Quoted in Lane, *Black Mountain College*, 80-81.

[100] Ibid., 146-147.

[*fig*. 3.19] The spirit of work: Student workers digging a drainage ditch, 1940

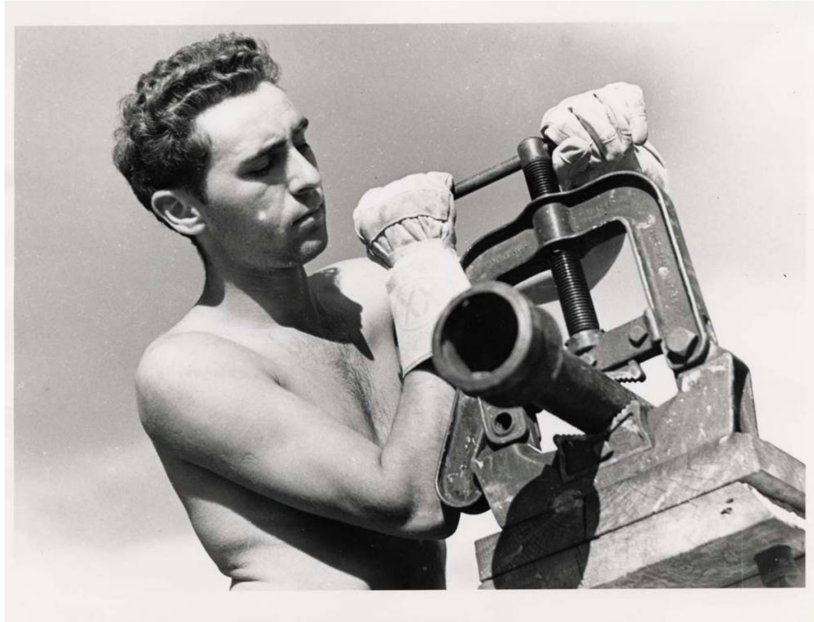
[*fig*. 3.20] The spirit of work: Student workers take a break while

working on the foundation of the Studies Building, 1940



[*fig*. 3.21] The spirit of work: Brochure for BMC Work Camp, Summer 1941

[*fig*. 3.22] The spirit of work: Workers at rest with BMC co-founder John Andrew Rice



[*fig*. 3.23] The spirit of work: A BMC student in the work program

Like the Alberses' *matière* exercises, the photographs try our perception. We are unaccustomed, I think, to seeing young people in this light—shirtless, pants rolled up, muscles straining, they belong in Abercrombie & Fitch ads and Warby Parker billboards, in the "gingham" halo of Instagram filters and the throwback sepia of Snapchat. It is difficult, scanning the thousands of photographs housed at North Carolina's Western Regional Archive, not to be moved by the quiet dignity of these students' labor—their work does not look pleasant, but it looks meaningful, an embodiment of American labor as "significant craft," as spirit laboring itself into existence.

"More burden than any brightness": On drudgery

Not everyone at Black Mountain shared this spiritualism.

As I've suggested, the school's work program constituted a case study in the practical viability of "significant craft," testing the capacities of aesthetic and pedagogical practices—Josef's *Werklehre*, Anni's weaving, Duncan's poetry—in which work was invoked as both idealized metaphor and

romantic abstraction.

Literalizing a craft ideal that found in material resistance an avenue toward spiritual order, the work program serves as a limit for the very idea of aesthetic "craft," a metaphor carrying over—sometimes maladroitly—the experience of labor into artistic creation. As such, craft labor at Black Mountain helps us reassess the legacy of the American Arts and Crafts movement writ large. For if American Arts and Crafts did not explicitly prioritize the worker's submission to material, it did temper his self-expression through inherited technical standards, upholding a view of labor as spiritually meaningful in its own right. At Black Mountain, that spirit briefly flared then failed, fizzling out into widespread suspicion of and cynicism toward work as an ennobling ethic. "Phrases like 'to experience art as a process which is also life' are mere logomachy," Bernard DeVoto argued in an article on Black Mountain in *Harper's*, excoriating the adoption of work more fit for "jails and army cantonments" or the "labor battalions" of Hitler and Stalin.[101] As Dewey had argued, when work does not "remain permeated with the play attitude," it becomes drudgery, disconnected from other aspects of workers' lives and preventing rather than facilitating their spiritual thriving.[102]

That drudgery took many forms at Black Mountain, from slippages of attention—the routing of a sewer uphill, the roofing of a house with grease rather than asphalt cement—to an overzealous concern for self-sufficiency that caused Dreier to "run himself ragged" gathering construction materials, determining crop rotations, and deciding whether to sell or silage the autumn harvest.[103] Notes from Dreier and college farmer Roscoe Penley indicate the meticulousness with which they managed their work, scribbled over as they are with budgets, crop ledgers, and instructions for the upcoming season: "graze cover crop of barley and vetch and plow under. (Lost hay crop due to lack

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[101] Bernard DeVoto, "Another Consociate Family," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (December 1, 1935), 606.
[102] Dewey, *Democracy*, 198. For more on Dewey's conception of "drudgery," see Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 145.
[103] Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 82. See also Harris, *The Arts*, 64.

of manure.) Silage corn 75 tons at $6.50 per ton $487.00."[104] Material resistances are one thing, but Dreier and Penley's notes reveal the potential of those resistances to foreclose rather than open onto spiritual order—the failure of the filament of work to ignite. Even the German exile Gothe, so integral to the efficient functioning of construction in its early stages, ultimately proved too autocratic for Black Mountain, the former economist and master mechanic let go at the end of spring term, 1941. Though the work program endured through the 1940s and into the 50s, its most outspoken and effective critic would be its last: Black Mountain rector Charles Olson. Assuming the rectorship in 1951, Olson ordered all future work "to be done by hired hands," revoking the academic credit associated with the work program and himself refusing basic community duties like washing dishes and cutting wood. "No more of this community horseshit," Olson wrote to Robert Creeley, "which, at least when there are so few people, is more burden than any brightness."[105]

Olson's shuttering of the work program met with little opposition. Indeed, by 1951 few Black Mountain faculty remained to challenge him. Two years earlier, Josef and Anni Albers had decamped for New Haven, Connecticut, where Josef's *Werklehre* course and linear aesthetic would become hallmarks of Yale's nationally recognized Department of Design and where Anni continued work on her writing and pictorial weavings. Theodore Dreier, "chief Messianist" of the work program, had resigned that same year, objecting to faculty plans to shift Black Mountain curricula away from the arts—of which the work program was part—and toward courses in economics and the social sciences. Descending into a kind of spiritual lassitude, its physical plant eroding, Black Mountain's final desperate years dramatized how integral the Black Mountain craft ideal had been to its overall mission. Rather than sharing meals in the dining hall and living in communal dormitories, students moved into isolated cottages on the hillsides, roving old-growth forests for firewood—

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[104] "Notes and Recommendations for Farm Plan," in Black Mountain College Project Collection, PC.7008, Box 5: NP, North Carolina Western Regional Archives.

[105] Quoted in Harris, *The Arts*, 175. For further examination of Olson's role as rector, see Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 211-239.

"Breughelesque bands of student woodsmen," Tom Clark calls them—and permitting the fields and outbuildings of the college to pass into disrepair.[106] Among the dairy herd, long a sought-after assignment in the work program, an outbreak of mastitis contributed to the death of one cow, and others had begun "to drown in [their] own shit" as a result of unmucked stables.[107] Voracious kudzu overtook even those buildings still in use. Piles of trash grew by the day in the Studies Building. By the end, the school had become unrecognizable to those who had founded it, its entropic decline from order to disorder—from discipline to decadence, spirit to spoilage—refracting and representing in miniature wider changes in postwar American culture.

For the problems at Black Mountain were not merely material. In contrast to the joyous optimism of students from the 1930s and 40s—readily apparent in photographs from that era—students of the 1950s reported disillusionment at many aspects of Black Mountain culture, alienated especially, they felt, from the faith in work that had dominated Black Mountain during its early years. Expressing their alienation in disheveled clothing and unkempt hair, in drinking, drug use, and insubordination, students under Olson prefigured that "counterculture" that would profoundly reorient American society in the 1960s and 70s, advocating individuality and self-expression in ways that would have appalled the Alberses. Returning for a visit in the summer of 1956, former student Michael Rumaker recalled a "psychotic unpredictable energy in the air," an horrific parody of the spirit that had once moved through and ordered so much of students' experiences at Black Mountain.[108] That same year—Black Mountain's last—Robert Duncan had described the school and its students as "very noticeably derelict," no longer "the Black Mountain one had heard about in the late 1930s, when there was a coordination between the land and its farms and the college."[109]

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[106] Clark, *Charles Olson*, 239. For elaboration on the decline of Black Mountain in its final years, see Harris, *The Arts*, 168-180.

[107] Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 364.

[108] Michael Rumaker, *Robert Duncan in San Francisco* (San Francisco: City Lights/Grey Fox, 2013), 4.

[109] Quoted in Vincent Katz, "Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art," in *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, ed. Vincent Katz (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 211.

Though he would teach only two semesters—one in the summer of 1954, the other in spring term, 1956—and though Black Mountain College, as he knew it, was by then a spiritless husk of itself, Duncan's work explicitly drew from and extended the school's craft ideal, promoting the material resistances of language and linguistic form not only as a freer, more authentic mode of expression, but as formal egress onto universal spiritual order. By 1956, Duncan understood that this ideal had lapsed, at Black Mountain and possibly everywhere. "In the new generation," he lamented, "poets have returned to drugs, to hashish, principally marijuana, but also to heroin, to seek their highs and their being *sent*." "[T]he trip is a 'gas,'" Duncan wrote. "Well, I like poems that are a gas. But this is a gas, the spirit, that is filled with and fills itself with the world."[110] If the "psychotic energy" that Rumaker identified began—as early as the late 1940s—in the Faulkner-esque decay of an arts college in western North Carolina, it ended, as Joan Didion and others have observed, twenty years later in the French country-style mansion at 10050 Cielo Drive. It ended in the lawnmower drone of high-altitude bombers over Hanoi, and in what Duncan saw as the equally psychotic energy of the protests inspired by those bombings. Objecting to a counterculture that would simply replace one authoritarian ideology with another, Duncan argued to friend and fellow poet Denise Levertov that the role of artists was not "inflicting peace on their own terms," but "acts of care in making." "The art of the poem—which has fallen into disrepair—[is] the art of long persisting and careful work," Duncan argued. "I am not talking about prisoners, blacks, children, and angry women in revolt—I am talking about those with work to do deserting their work. And our work is surely to get the words *right*…"[111]

Duncan's is a complicated aesthetic ethics, one which, like the ethics of Catholicism, cuts across contemporary political affiliations and challenges cemented shibboleths on both sides of the political

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[110] Robert Duncan, "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife," in *Collected Essays and Other Prose*, ed. James Maynard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 213.

[111] Duncan to Denise Levertov, October 4, 1971, in *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 662.

divide. At the heart of his ethics, though, is profound faith in the work of the poet, work he understood—like Dreier, like the Alberses—as manifesting a spiritual order too frequently neglected in the urgencies of American life. Attending to Duncan's work, both in his poetry and in his poetry workshops, reveals how an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal continued, even after the demise of the movement itself, to inform the theory and practice of creative writing. For in addition to invoking the Alberses' pedagogies in the visual arts, Duncan explicitly cited American Arts and Crafts practitioners like Gustav Stickley as an influence on his poetics and pedagogy, maintaining, across these practices, that the writer's expression should be tempered by the material resistance of language. Indeed, Duncan's inheritance of American Arts and Crafts ideology is particularly relevant to the disciplinary genealogy this project constructs, since in Duncan's work we see creative writing—and the craft ideal behind it—migrating ever closer to the center of American higher education.

III. "The million sorties of the life code in its variations manifesting itself": Robert Duncan

"The trembling in the steadiness the work demands": Duncan as weaver

Until 2012, if students of poetry were inclined to look up the poetics of the "Black Mountain School" in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, they were met with a one-line prompt to "See PROJECTIVE VERSE."[112] Though the newest edition expands on that suggestion, it continues to define the movement through Olson's influential 1950 essay, following the lead of Donald Allen's 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* in identifying "Black Mountain" poets based on their association with and publication in *Black Mountain Review*, that journal for which Olson—in his first act as rector, with the college unable even to pay faculty salaries—appointed

[112] "Black Mountain School," in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 137.

$500 from the Black Mountain operating budget.[113]

The association of Black Mountain with Charles Olson, a critical commonplace to the present, is not inaccurate. Whatever his limitations as an administrator, Olson was a tireless editor and promoter of his friends' writing, and as student comments attest he remained a beloved teacher throughout his tenure at Black Mountain College, where his classes frequently went on past midnight, fueled by cigarettes and Appalachian moonshine. Olson was and remains, moreover, a titanic figure in American letters, his inexhaustible stores of energy directed perpetually to multiple outlets at once, from a groundbreaking scholarly reassessment of *Moby Dick* to an ambitious postmodern poetics which offered a bold challenge to mainstream academic poetry. In more ways than one, Olson simply *was* Black Mountain.

Lost, however, in collapsing writers as distinct as Robert Creeley and Denise Levertov into Olson surrogates is a sense of the institutional identity that underlay aesthetic theory and practice at Black Mountain College. As I've indicated, that identity significantly informed the work of Robert Duncan, whose poetics, while influenced by Olson, at the same time extended a Black Mountain craft ideal as practiced by Josef and Anni Albers and in the college work program. The import of such an ideal tends to be veiled from scholarly view by Olson's move to pivot Black Mountain in its dying days into a series of para-institutional initiatives, among them the *Review* so integral to the consolidation and critical reception of "Black Mountain" poetics; thrown off by this administrative shakeup, scholars of American poetry overlook the continuity of Duncan's poetics with other Black Mountain practices. In the final section of this chapter, then, I argue that the "School" in the *Princeton Encyclopedia*'s "Black Mountain School" constitutes more than metaphor.[114]

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113 For more on Olson's management of the Black Mountain budget, see Clark, *Charles Olson*, 240.

114 For further commentary on Olson's re-branding of Black Mountain College, see Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 222-224 and Reynolds, *Visions*, 195-198.

Duncan himself explicitly situated his work—including in the poetry workshops he taught at Black Mountain—in relation to the Alberses' pedagogy, explaining to interviewer Mary Harris in 1971 that he "just had what would be anybody's idea of what [Josef] Albers must have been doing. You knew that [Albers's students] had color theory, and that they did a workshop sort of approach, and that they didn't aim at a finished painting. I thought, 'Well, that's absolutely right.'" Invoking the Alberses' basic *matière* and *material* studies, Duncan describes his own courses as "work with the materials of poetry," including "five weeks of just vowels," as well as studies in pitches and stresses, consonant clusters, syllables, sounds, and junctures, a pedagogy geared, like the Alberses', toward defamiliarizing linguistic material in order to break the scaffolding of habit.[115] "Only words come into [the poem]," Duncan wrote. "The tone leading of vowels, the various percussions of consonants. The play of numbers in stresses and syllables."[116] Subordinating ego to material resistances, writers no less than craftsmen, Duncan believed, could achieve freer, more authentic expression and glimpse that spiritual order moving beneath the surfaces of things. In later prose writing, Duncan grounds this materialism in the human body, echoing Olson's focus on the breath in explaining that "*VOWELS* are related by position in relation to lips, velum, how the breath is emitted, articulation […] our *a-I* of *tile* is a glide, between *a* (low central) and *I* (high front)."[117] Among Black Mountain's already disaffected student body, Duncan's pedagogy proved a hard sell. Writing to Levertov, Duncan describes having to maintain a steady supply of coffee throughout his 8 a.m. class in order to keep his "would-be poets directed to the immediate task of gaining a craft."

> [A]nd they, not yet awake to the feel of the language, much less to the depths that words are filld with, are impatient of hearing the vowels and consonants, at taking soundings—I find myself already raising my own specters in their minds, as if it were their part to know how the power of a word can overwhelm the spirit, that they must at once work with the greatest discretion, knowing the finest and most exact

[115] Quoted in Lisa Jarnot, *Robert Duncan: The Ambassador from Venus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 154.

[116] Robert Duncan, "Introduction to *Bending the Bow*," in *The Collected Later Poems and Plays*, ed. Peter Quartermain (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 297.

[117] Duncan, "From Notes on the Structure of Rime," 291.

> measures in the materials at hand—the exacting of the sounds and timings, the concern for localities, melodies, and resonances of meaning—and at the same time tremble, and contain the trembling in the steadiness work demands.[118]

The passage is a remarkable encapsulation of Black Mountain's spiritualized craft ideal, firm in its conviction that immediate engagement with the material resistances of language opens onto Kierkegaardian "trembling," onto "spirit."

That ideal was at the heart of Duncan's poetry, in particular a serial poem, called "Passages," conceived at Black Mountain College and published across several of Duncan's mid-career and late collections, most prominently his 1968 *Bending the Bow*. While Duncan scholars prioritize his first and most critically acclaimed collection, *The Opening of the Field*, as Duncan's most meaningful contribution to Black Mountain poetics—or, as it is variously referred to, "open form," "field poetics," or "composition by field"—it is in *Bending the Bow* that we find Duncan's most mature and sustained engagement with the Black Mountain craft ideal, the work therein addressing and explicitly modeling itself after pivotal craft practices like weaving and architecture. Though serial form and open sequences were common among the Black Mountain and San Francisco Renaissance poets with whom Duncan associated—*The Maximus Poems* being the most iconic example—Duncan viewed his own serial poetics as a spiritual practice akin to Josef Albers's "structural constellations," a way of entering in and manifesting universal spiritual order. "I came to be concerned not with poems in themselves," Duncan describes, "but with the life of poems as part of the evolving and continuing work of a poetry I could never complete—a poetry that had begun long before I was born and that extended beyond my own work in it."[119]

One of the earliest "Passages" poems, though, looks not to Josef's but to Anni's artistic practice as a metaphor for the operations of poetry; Duncan finds in weaving—as so many had before him,

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[118] Duncan to Denise Levertov, February, 26, 1965, in *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 489.

[119] Duncan, "Man's Fulfillment…," 204.

from Ovid to Olson—an apt allegory for the in-forming of spirit in language. Indeed the poem, titled "At the Loom," opens by braiding together in a kind of triple-weave palimpsest Duncan's own poetic genealogy, invoking Pound, Homer, and those countless other mythological sources in which weaving stands in for the procedures of language, warp and weft for the strings and crossbar of the lyre. Here is the poem's opening movement:

> A cat's purr
> in the hwirr thkk "*thgk, thkk*"
> of Kirke's loom on Pound's Cantos
> "*I heard a song of that kind…*"
>
> my mind a shuttle among
> set strings of the music
> lets a weft of dream grow in the day time,
> an increment of associations,
> luminous soft threads,
> the thrown glamour, crossing and recrossing,
> the twisted sinews underlying the work.
>
> Back of the images, the few cords that bind
> meaning in the word-flow,
> the rivering web
> rises among wits and senses
> gathering the wool into its full cloth.
>
> The secret! the secret! It's hid
> in its showing forth.

As its vertiginous allusiveness indicates, ghosting the poem like a weaving cartoon are those poetic laborers whose work Duncan carries on, the poem a laborious "increment of associations"—Pound's term for literary communities—endeavoring to fulfill the past in the present. That effort—poem as textual anamnesis—places Duncan within a tradition of process philosophy which holds, in Whitehead's terms, that entities draw on "a feeling of the world in the past" in their prehension of other entities, "inherit[ing] the world as a complex of feeling."[120] Whitehead himself picks up this appreciation of—or apperception toward—the past from the spiritual materialism of Bergson, in

[120] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 125.

particular the latter's definition of "spirit" as "a synthesis of past and present with a view to the future." "To touch the reality of spirit," Bergson contends, "we must place ourselves at the point where an individual consciousness, continuing and retaining the past in a present enriched by it, thus escapes the law of necessity. […] When we pass from pure perception to memory, we definitely abandon matter for spirit."[121] Duncan, we know, had been reading Whitehead's *Process and Reality* throughout his tenure at Black Mountain College, and soon thereafter invited Olson to give a series of lectures on the philosopher at the San Francisco State University Poetry Center, where Duncan took over as assistant director following Black Mountain's closure in 1956.[122] Duncan's fidelity in "At the Loom," accordingly, is not necessarily to previous poetic weavers, but to the spiritual order in whose service they worked. For underlying his linguistic tapestry—structuring it like warp "cords" or "set strings of the music"—is that cosmic "full cloth" whose "secret" the poem manifests. So seamlessly does the poem weave itself in with this "full cloth" that it becomes difficult to separate syntactically the poet's "weft of dream" from the spiritual fabric to which his dreaming binds him, the immanence of spirit in matter neatly encapsulated in Duncan's paradoxical description of a secret "hid / in its showing forth." And that "showing forth," as should now be familiar, occurs through material resistances, through onomatopoeia, sonic texturing, and "twisted sinews"—or syntax—that instantiate linguistically the resistance of the weaver's fabric. As we read the passage, we feel its language working.

As the poem takes shape, moreover, Duncan, like Penelope, undoes his earlier weaving in order to refigure the titular loom as multiple prehistoric tools and forms of labor:

> And the shuttle carrying the woof I find
> was *skutill* "*harpoon*" —a dart, an arrow,

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[121] Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1913), 294, 113.

[122] For more consideration of Duncan's relation to process philosophy, see Michael Davidson, "A Book of First Things: *The Opening of the Field*," in *Robert Duncan: Scales of the Marvelous*, eds. Robert J. Bertholf and Ian Reid (New York: New Directions, 1979), 56-84; James Maynard, *Robert Duncan and the Pragmatist Sublime* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018); and Von Hallberg, *Charles Olson*, 72-103.

or a little ship,

navicula *weberschiff*,
crossing and recrossing from shore to shore—

prehistoric **skutil* **skut-*
"*a bolt*, *a bar*, *as of a door*"
"*a flood-gate*" •

If Duncan's etymological excavation continues his effort, as Bergson put it, to "touch the reality of spirit" through memory, the poem's final movement indicates the extent to which Duncan remains "bar[red]" from that spirit, cut off by the slamming shut of a prehistoric "*flood-gate*," itself resonant with mythological import. The bullet-point after "*flood-gate*"—marker in Duncan's poetics for a caesura or interval of silence—doubles down on this sense of exile, shifting the poem into a more traditionally "lyric" speaker whose recollection of the Trojan War includes one final metaphor for acts of weaving and writing: bending the bow:

but the battle I saw
was on a wide plain, for the
sake of valor,
the hand traind to the bow,
the man's frame
withstanding, each side

facing its foe for the sake of
the alliance,
allegiance, the legion, that the
vow that makes a nation
one body not be broken.

Yet it is all, we know, a mêlée,
a medley of mistaken themes
grown dreadful and surmounting dread,

so that Achilles may have his wrath
and throw down
the heroic Hektor who raised
the reflection of the heroic

in his shield…[123]

An iconic embodiment of the Black Mountain craft ideal, Duncan's archer "withstand[s]" the material resistance of his bow in the same way that the weaver works against the loom's warp or that the writer, as Duncan believed, subordinates himself to the material of language. As Anni Albers describes this process, "a balanced interplay of passive obedience to the dictation of the material on the one side and of active forming is the process of creating."[124] For both Albers and Duncan, this balance constitutes an effort to attain freer, more authentic expression and to access that universal order behind workaday realities—or so the ideal holds.

For juxtaposed with the calibration of Duncan's archer is Achilles's unhinged expression of his egoistic wrath, the poem likewise unraveling in its final stanzas into a "medley of mistaken themes," trailing off in the loose thread of a closing ellipsis. Scholars have read the poem's close as an indictment of American involvement in the Vietnam War, a conflict Duncan saw as an abdication of spiritual and political responsibility: "Duncan's literary understanding of war as a violent struggle between victim and aggressor," argues Anne Day Dewey, "challenges the government's one-sided image of a war for national glory."[125] The interpretation is a plausible one; in a later poem in *Bending the Bow* Duncan even updates Achilles's undisciplined expression to a contemporary context, describing "the All-American boy in the cockpit / loosing his flow of napalm […] releasing his story of destruction over the enemy."[126] To delimit Duncan's imagery within a contemporary political context, however, is to ignore his meditation here on the procedures of his own poetics. If Achilles's indulgence models the loss of aesthetic discipline—"the hubris of creative ecstasy," Anni

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123 Robert Duncan, "At the Loom," in *The Collected Later Poems and Plays*, ed. Peter Quartermain (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 307-309.

124 Anni Albers, "Art—A Constant," 14.

125 See especially Dewey, *Beyond Maximus*, 124-131. For other "political" interpretations of "At the Loom" see Reginald Gibbons, "Simultaneities: The Bow, the Lyre, the Loom," in *How Poems Think* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 174-175 and Peter Michelson, "A Materialist Critique of Duncan's Grand Collage," *Boundary 2* 8, no. 2 (Winter, 1980): 38-39.

126 Robert Duncan, "Up Rising," in *The Collected Later Poems and Plays*, ed. Peter Quartermain (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 367.

Albers calls it—Duncan's closing image also comes counter-woven with the implication that the spiritual potential of "significant craft" remains viable despite "surmounting dread"; Duncan's repetition of the word "heroic," for instance, evokes a kind of *mise en abyme* in which—as when viewing oneself in parallel mirrors—infinity is made material in polished metal.[127] The poem's closing ellipsis, then, reads not so much as an unraveling but a continuation, a "prehending," Whitehead might call it, weaving the poem in with a spiritual order that always exceeds it. And the ellipsis gestures equally toward the longer poem of which "At the Loom" is a part, Duncan's serial poetics a spiritual discipline not only in the sense of a daily or iterative practice, but of a potentially endless process toward spirit. In Whitehead's materialist network, we will recall, "actual entities" were themselves caught up in this process, seeking "satisfaction" through ever higher "gradations of intensity," a quasi-evolutionary growth that could be abetted by greater order in an entity's immediate environment. Similarly, the individual poems of Duncan's "Passages" prehend toward, reverberate against, abrade, alter, and amplify one another in a process that Duncan calls "intensifications of Its orders." "*It*," Duncan says, the critical pronoun doubly emphasized, "is striving to come into existence in these things, or, all striving to come into existence is It."[128]

Cutting across three collections and thirty years, "Passages" constitutes for Duncan a "grand collage" that both models and manifests a higher, spiritual order of creation; its tapestry reveals not only a vertical core-sample of the past but a horizontal arranging of sources on the field of the page, what Duncan called "parts fitting in relation to a design that is larger than the poem."[129] We might identify a number of influences on Duncan's collagist aesthetic. In James Maynard's reading, Duncan's poetics owes as much to American pragmatism as to Whiteheadian process philosophy, oriented as Duncan's work is toward "conditions of plenitude and change" as described in William

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127 Anni Albers, "Work with Materials," NP

128 Duncan, "Introduction to *Bending the Bow*," 298.

129 Ibid., 298, 297.

James and John Dewey. "Duncan's writing […] continually struggles to find a poetics adequate to the pluralistic complexities of the real," Maynard contends, and can therefore "never be anything but a working *toward* the pragmatist sublime."[130] So too is Duncan's work part of a broader interest in collage among gay visual artists at mid-century, including the "combines" of Josef Albers's student Robert Rauschenberg and the "translations" produced by Duncan's partner, Jess. Jess's collage and line-drawing serves as the cover for the original Grove Press edition of *The Opening of the Field*, and Duncan frequently links their work in his essays and correspondence. "He has gone far ahead in these paintings in exploring color tones and sets (what in poetry would be vowel progressions)," Duncan writes of Jess in a letter to Denise Levertov, himself aspiring to "correlat[e] the intuitive organization of vowels with the designing organization of numbers […] giving another more obscure source of measure in the poem."[131] As Duncan's own visual metaphor—"grand collage"—implies, his poetics also extends and develops a Black Mountain craft ideal dedicated to mapping and enacting a sublime spiritual order; describing his poetics, Duncan might just as easily be describing the Alberses' *matière* studies in texture and appearance, in particular the color collages in which a single color was made to appear variously re-colored in relation to its neighbors. "[I]n the grand collage," Duncan writes, "signs flash green against blue, black against white, red against yellow." And "all the signs rime," Duncan asserts.[132]

Such "rimes"—happy coincidences, it may be, between Duncan's "Passages" and the Black Mountain craft ideal—flare up like sparks in archival material otherwise full of resistances. An underscored passage in John Urbain's notes from Josef Albers's *Werklehre* course points to similarities between the visual and literary arts at Black Mountain: "Passages created by juxtaposition

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[130] Maynard, *Robert Duncan*, 2.

[131] Duncan to Denise Levertov, December 3, 1965, in *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 516.

[132] Robert Duncan, "The Structure of Rime XXII," in *The Collected Later Poems and Plays*, ed. Peter Quartermain (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 301.

of extremes."[133] A color copy of Duncan's 1954 crayon sketch "Wallpaper Design" [*fig*. 3.24]—produced alongside his work with wool rugs and stained-glass windows—proves not only exactly contemporaneous with Duncan's time at Black Mountain, but to bear a striking resemblance to Albers's earlier stained-glass assemblages.

[*fig*. 3.24] Robert Duncan, "Wallpaper Design," 1954

More admissible, perhaps, to the court of critical appraisal is the fact that Duncan's workshops, in addition to adapting the Alberses' *matière* studies in surface texture, at the same time re-purposed their *material* studies in structural capacity, with students examining the formal structures subtending various texts, including the book of Genesis. "Out of the classroom conversations," Lisa Jarnot

[133] Urbain, "Class notes…," NP.

describes, Duncan "wove together early poems of his *Structure of Rime* series with its attention to ideas of 'law' or form."[134] The import of Genesis—as richly woven a *textus* as exists—would not have been lost on Duncan. The book opens, in one of its competing creation accounts, with spirit "moving upon the face of the waters," and the central event in the narrative that unfolds therefrom is the divine injunction to labor—"in the sweat of thy face"—as a way of attaining that spirit once again.

This, anyway, "till thou return unto the ground," the E writer explains. "For dust thou art."[135]

<u>Ghost House; or, "The indwelling": Duncan as architect</u>

His sublimation of lyric expression in the materiality of language—"what makes the difference," he explained, "between mere craft (the triviality of workmanship in and of itself) and significant craft"—was at the heart of Duncan's heated and friendship-severing dispute with Levertov in the fall of 1971, with Duncan objecting that Levertov's personal political convictions intruded into and corrupted the order of poems like "Tenebrae" and "Life at War." "[Y]our verse form has become habituated to commenting and personalizing," Duncan wrote, "just where the poem itself begins to open out beyond the personal into your imagination of a 'you,' a 'world' or a history beyond your idea of yourself or your personal history."[136] While sustained engagement with their dispute lies beyond the scope of this chapter, the exchange does highlight how Duncan's poetics inform his political ethics, in particular his objection to anything which might sway the writer from his proper spiritual work. "The moralist must always be outraged by what God finds good," Duncan writes, "for God works, as the creative artist works, not with a sense of rewards and punishments, but to

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[134] Jarnot, *Robert Duncan*, 154.
[135] Genesis 3:19 (New American Standard Version).
[136] Duncan to Denise Levertov, November 3, 1971, in *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 669.

fulfill the law that he creates."[137] Unfaithful to the poem's intensification of its order, Levertov's politics foreclose, according to Duncan, "any imagination of or feeling of what such greed, racism or imperialism is like," papering over with approved moral slogans the in-forming of spirit in language. "The poet's role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it," Duncan argued.

> [W]hat if Shakespeare had opposed Iago, or Dostoyevsky opposed Raskolnikov—the vital thing is that they *created* Iago and Raskolnikov. And we begin to see betrayal and murder and theft in a new light. It is a disease of our generation that we offer symptoms and diagnoses of what we are in the place of imaginations and creations of what we are.[138]

Despite the scholarly juxtaposition of "open" and "closed" poetries, Duncan's insistence on formal integrity within the field of the poem resembles quite closely a New Critical aestheticism that would banish Levertov's hortatory as "didactic" propaganda.[139] For Duncan, however, one imagines evil the more powerfully to combat it, to draw into existence a spiritual order beyond conventional notions of right and wrong; Duncan does not so much advocate "evil," that is, as fidelity to that supra-moral order moving in and beyond us. "In the plenitude of His powers," Duncan explains, "He works always upon the edge of arbitrary alternatives; He could, we know, change the work if He would. But first among His powers is His Oneness in creation: the universe is faithful to itself."[140]

While weaving constitutes one analog for this creation, equally prominent in Duncan's "Passages" series—and in the pedagogy and work program at Black Mountain College—is the significant craft of architecture, that craft which Bauhaus founder Gropius had seen as the unity and apotheosis of all crafts. Architecture was equally integral, of course, to the ideology and practice of the American Arts and Crafts movement, from its invocation of Ruskin's Gothic cathedral to an

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[137] Duncan, "Introduction to *Bending the Bow*," 298.

[138] Duncan to Denise Levertov, November 3, 1971, in *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 669.

[139] For critical maintenance of a strong distinction between "open" and "closed" poetries, see especially Conte, *Unending Design*, 1-44.

[140] Duncan, "Introduction to *Bending the Bow*," 298.

"American Craftsman" style promoted by Stickley and embodied most conspicuously in the work of architects Harvey Ellis, Greene and Greene, and Julia Morgan. The credo of one crafts organization, the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston, anticipates principal Duncan keywords in declaring its mission "to counteract popular impatience of Law and Form, and the desire for […] specious originality"; proper architecture, the SACB maintained, "will insist upon the necessity of sobriety and restraint, of ordered arrangement, of due regard for the relation between the form of an object and its use."[141] In an interview in 1985, Duncan echoes these SACB strictures, explaining that "I architect my poems. […] You design how people move through them and so that's [a] projected imagination already of how you're not going to live in a room, but how you're going to go from one passageway to another. So, it's very natural that I would have a long poem called 'Passages.'"[142] Duncan's interest in architecture was "natural" for other reasons as well. His adoptive father, Edwin Symmes, was a practicing architect in Oakland, and Duncan's childhood home—a Mission Revival-style house on the city's north side—reflected the theosophist faith and occult interests of his parents, its high wooden crossbeams resembling a theosophist cathedral and its interior balcony allowing Duncan to look down surreptitiously on his parents' worship.

Like "At the Loom," "The Architecture" functions as both an historical core-sample of previous workers in the craft and a spatial arrangement of "parts fitting in relation," the quintessential "grand collage" imagined as architectural assemblage. The poem opens, fittingly, by quoting Stickley's 1909 *Craftsman Homes* for its description of what Duncan viewed as an ideally ordered structure:

> "…it must have recesses. There is a great charm in a room broken up
> in plan, where that slight feeling of mystery is given to it which arises
> when you cannot see the whole room from any one place…when there
> is always something around the corner"

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141 Quoted in Janet Koplos and Bruce Metcalf, *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 75.

142 Quoted in Jarnot, *Robert Duncan*, 33. For more on the influence of Duncan's parents on his poetics, see Michael Davidson, "Foreword," in *Robert Duncan: The Ambassador to Venus*, ed. Lisa Jarnot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), xix and Jarnot, *Robert Duncan*, 12-33.

from the window-shelter

the light

the curtains of daffodil-yellow

light

beyond •

a little night music

after noon

• strains of *Mahoganny* on the phonograph

distant

intoxications of brazen crisis,

the (1930) *Können einem toten Mann nicht helfen* chorus

the procession with drum-roll

in the distance

recesst

As might by now be apparent, Duncan's is an explicit meta-poetics, constantly figuring and re-figuring its own compositional procedures; here, the rooms and recesses of Stickley's Craftsman-style home gesture to an elusive but ever-present "whole" of which they are a part, an order duplicated soon after in the poem's bookcases, their "glimmering titles arrayd [like] keys"—"Hesiod • Heraklitus • *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*…" The formal order within these networks—or assemblages, or collages, or constellations, our metaphors for Duncan's work as various, potentially, as his own—matters for Duncan in that it allows for what he elsewhere calls the

"indwelling" of spirit in material form, maintaining that "if we have not set things to rights, / the indwelling / is not with us."[143] In the passage from "The Architecture" quoted above, that spirit manifests as light flickering in Duncan's "daffodil-yellow" curtains, their pleats and folds offering only a glimpse of some "beyond" the poem approaches. Similar images recur throughout the middle of the poem, where porches open onto gardens and staircases onto mysterious "upper regions," all figures for the poem's "building" from material to spiritual realms.

Because the various rooms and floors of Duncan's poetics are so closely built together, that middle section demands quoting in full, beginning with another citation of Stickley:

> "Take a house planned in this way, with a big living room, its great fire-
> place, open staircase, casement windows, built-in seats, cupboards, book-
> cases…and perhaps French doors opening out upon a porch"…
>
> *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*
> *Plutarch's Morals: Theosophical Essays*
> *Avicenna*
> *The Zohar*
> *The Aurora*
>
> I was reading while the music playd
>
> curled up among the ornamental cushions
>
> …"which links the house with the garden / and
>
> sparkling into the jeweld highlights given forth by
> copper, brass, or embroideries"
>
> "the staircase, instead of being hidden away in a small hall or treated as a
> necessary evil, made one of the most beautiful and prominent features
> of the room because it forms a link between the social part of the house
> and the upper regions"…
>
> Below the house in the dark of the peppertree
>
> stript to the moonlight embraced

[143] Robert Duncan, *The Opening of the Field* (San Francisco: New Directions, 1973), 36.

for the mystery's sake   mounting

thru us the • garden's recesses

One cannot, in Duncan's poetics, read "garden" without hearing "*the* garden," though what seems of greater import here is that the transit from house to garden, as rendered in Stickley's interrupted prose, occurs only through those "passages" opened up by hermetic texts like *The Zohar*. Likewise, Duncan's passionate "embrace" in his own garden provides passage for that unnamed and unnamable spirit "mounting // thru us," the bullet-point serving as caesura, perhaps, but also a kind of supra-linguistic presence—a black hole, absolute matter. Returning to and inverting Genesis, Duncan recovers *the* garden as a home, a site not for exile but indwelling, not mourning but "mounting." Ideas of dwelling and "indwelling" appear, too, in the many images of domestic contentment that run throughout "The Architecture," from the languid afternoon strains of Kurt Weill on the phonograph to Duncan "curled up among the ornamental cushions," imagery that suggests an "at-homeness" in the universe at large. To invoke Gaston Bachelard, Duncan's architecture is a nest, a shell, a corner, "our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word."[144] Whether Duncan knew Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, published in English in 1964—or the earlier Martin Heidegger essay it closely resembles, "Building Dwelling Thinking"—remains unclear, but the coziness of Duncan's poem echoes both Heideggarian and Bachelardian notions of dwelling, the idea of the home as a "protected intimacy," as Bachelard puts it, one of our "greatest powers of imagination for the thoughts, memories, and dreams of mankind." Both Heidegger and Bachelard understood poetry, moreover, as a means of reconstructing this cosmic ur-home; "through poems," Bachelard wrote, "perhaps more than through recollections, we touch the ultimate poetic depth of the space of the house." And Heidegger: both "building and thinking

[144] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 4.

belong to dwelling. […] [O]ne as much as the other comes from the workshop of long experience and incessant practice."[145]

Whether or not he knew this work, Duncan's *practice* of home evinces a similar commitment to dwelling. Prior to arriving at Black Mountain in the summer of 1954, Duncan had been living with Jess in an apartment in the former Adolph Spreckels mansion in San Francisco, by then a rundown Greek Revival-style enclave for musicians, poets, and painters in the city's Pacific Heights neighborhood. Nicknamed "Ghost House"—and currently the home of romance novelist Danielle Steele—the apartment "was a place of habitation ultimately independent of time and space," as Christopher Wagstaff describes it, "where the flow of ideas and the conjunction of poetry and painting fed [Duncan and Jess] daily."[146] Returning from Black Mountain after the school's closure in 1956, Duncan moved with Jess to a sprawling Victorian at 3267 20th Street in San Francisco's Mission District, stuffing the house's four floors with paintings, records, sculptures, antique Tiffany lamps, and other kitsch Victoriana, as well as massive libraries of French and modernist literature, esoteric treatises, Oz books, and fairy tales. Embodying Duncan's "grand collage," the house was the antithesis of Bauhaus architecture, far removed from the abstraction and clean angularity of Black Mountain's Studies Building.[147]

Of course, by the time Duncan left, the Studies Building was hardly the clean, otherworldly structure it once had been. If Bauhaus architectures are not pristine they are decrepit: Duncan was keenly attuned during his time there to the spiritual and material decline of all that "Black Mountain"

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[145] Ibid., 3, 6. Martin Heidegger, "Building Thinking Dwelling," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 161.

[146] Christopher Wagstaff, "'This Here Other World': The Art of Robert Duncan and Jess," in *An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle*, eds. Michael Duncan and Christopher Wagstaff (Portland: Crocker Art Museum, 2013), 54.

[147] For further description of Duncan's living arrangements, see Michael Duncan, "An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle," in in *An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle*, eds. Michael Duncan and Christopher Wagstaff (Portland: Crocker Art Museum, 2013), 9-39 and Peter Quartermain, "Introduction," in *The Collected Later Poems and Plays*, ed. Peter Quartermain (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), xxix.

had meant. "We stayed in the so-called Gropius building," Duncan recalled in an interview, "which by that time was a derelict piece of modernism—nothing looks more run down than an art moderne building ten years later. […] One had only to walk about to find deserted laboratories with broken glasses and splendid kiln equipment which had just gone to ruin."[148] Soon after auctioning off the college farm and other Black Mountain property, Olson sold the Studies Building to a local gravel company, using the revenue to pay off the college's debts and refund back-salaries owed faculty from as far back as the Rice era. The building and former Black Mountain property remain, as then, difficult to access, nestled in an isolated valley at the end of an unprepossessing dirt road, half an hour's drive from Asheville. The property, a sign informs passersby, is monitored by closed-circuit television, its entrances flanked by what amount to guard shacks. Driving past, one can just catch a glimpse of the Studies Building through stands of oak and loblolly pines. Its corrugated transite facing, so luminous in photos from the building's construction, hardly glints in the golden, late evening light. The building seems to sink into itself at the edge of the water. Its roof slumps. Its windows are cracked. It is a Christian camp.

Of course, Black Mountain's craft ideal endured beyond the school's physical decline, as attention to Duncan's work helps make clear. For one, the "Black Mountain School" of American poetry would continue to draw on and transform aesthetic theory as developed in the pedagogy and practice of artists like Josef and Anni Albers; Black Mountain poets share not only an affiliation with Olson and *Black Mountain Review*, but an underlying faith in the submission of artistic ego to material dictation, a faith traceable to the ethos of Black Mountain College itself. If Christopher Beach argues that Olson and Duncan "failed to make major inroads into the poetic mainstream," their attention to the materiality of language serves as one source for the work of major Language poets

[148] Quoted in Vincent Katz, "Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art," in *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, ed. Vincent Katz (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 211.

like Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, and Barrett Watten.[149] Indeed, much of postmodern poetics writ large—from John Ashbery to Rosemarie Waldrop—incorporates collage, open forms, seriality, and an attention to process first popularized at Black Mountain. To be sure, postmodern poets rarely traffic in the kind of spiritualism that animated Duncan's work. But their investment in language as simultaneously a material and supra-human system signals their filiation with Duncan's "significant craft," helping us trace, too, the evolving influence of a craft ideal original to the American Arts and Crafts movement.

In this chapter, I have shown how that ideal informs—and is transformed by—artists working on the avant-garde of both poetry and the visual arts. Though Duncan's writing may have been "experimental" in form and sensibility, however, in both his poetry and pedagogy we find the craft legacy of creative writing occupying an increasingly influential role in the history of the discipline—and indeed of American higher education writ large. In what follows, I build on this legacy to examine the role of craft in constructing the "mainstream" of American poetry, turning to that genre most responsible for disseminating craft-based pedagogies among a mass audience and, in so doing, for extending the influence of American Art and Crafts ideology: the poetry "craft book."

[149] Christopher Beach, *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry Between Community and Institution* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 8.

Chapter Four

The Better Craftsmanship: Poetry Craft Books Then and Now

Despite its aspiration to spiritual enlightenment, Black Mountain College was no paradise, even before its decline and dissolution under rector Charles Olson. "Like all Edens, Black Mountain had its serpents," wrote former student Martin Duberman, alluding, among other serpents, to the uneasy détente that prevailed between the school and a surrounding community skeptical of both its progressive ideals and "experimental" student body.[1] Since its founding in 1933, Black Mountain had witnessed significant extramural tensions over everything from land purchases and arts and crafts practices—one recalls Anni Albers's contempt for the Appalachian crafts revival—to desegregation and the biased policing of students' sexual practices.

Animosity between "town and gown" was perhaps nowhere more pronounced than in a 1945 incident involving theater and creative writing professor Robert Wunsch. Late one evening in mid-June, Wunsch was caught *in flagrante* with a Marine in the front seat of his coupe roadster. Despite indication that the affair had been an attempt to entrap Wunsch, known to authorities as a gay man sympathetic to civil rights, Wunsch was arrested, imprisoned, and charged with "crimes against nature," to which he immediately pleaded guilty. On the intervention—and probably financial campaigning—of Black Mountain co-founder Theodore Dreier, Wunsch's charge was reduced to "aggravated trespass," provided he abdicate his post at Black Mountain and leave the area as soon as possible. While it remains unclear to what extent they understood the situation, students and faculty offered little resistance to this demand. Tendering his resignation, Wunsch left under cover of darkness soon afterward, driving west to California, where, in a grim parody of American

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[1] Quoted in Jason Ezell, "Martin Duberman's Queer Historiography and Pedagogy," *Black Mountain Studies Journal* 1 (ND), accessed December 6, 2019, http://blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/volume1/1-4-jason-ezell/.

mythology, he was last seen working under a pseudonym in a Los Angeles post office.[2]

The affair must have been particularly trying for Wunsch, an Asheville native who had spent much of his life teaching the creative arts in Asheville and Greensboro high schools and at Black Mountain College. It is that work with which I am most concerned. For in his role as both pedagogue and pedagogical theorist, Wunsch co-authored with high-school teacher Mary Reade Smith what was known as a creative writing "craft book," to be used especially in his fiction workshops at Black Mountain. Titled *Studies in Creative Writing*, Wunsch and Smith's 1933 text is an otherwise unremarkable example of the craft book genre, a mode which guided would-be writers toward authorship by providing instruction in and examples of distinct "craft" techniques. Massively popular across the first decades of the twentieth century, the genre took its name from its tendency to figure literary production in terms of manual labor. Wunsch and Smith, for instance, write that "the worker in any profession, if he would become a skilled craftsman, must learn to use effectively the materials peculiar to his own profession." In mechanical work, they continue, these materials consist of "bolts, screws, pistons, valves, cylinders, and a thousand and one related things. […] In writing the materials are words, phrases, clauses, impressions, comparisons, conversation, thoughts, and images." Early twentieth-century literary craft books tend especially to invoke building practices like masonry, architecture, and housing construction as corollaries for the creative process. Wunsch and Smith describe language as "the bricks out of which the literary house is built." Just as "the mason must select stones before building a structure, students aspiring to write must gather words."[3] Such figurations are widespread during this period, within craft books and within literary discourse writ large; when T. S. Eliot famously identifies Ezra Pound as "*il miglior fabbro*," then, he draws on and focuses a broader contemporary fascination with craft rhetoric.

[2] See Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co, Inc., 1972), 225-227 and Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), 105.

[3] William Robert Wunsch and Mary Reade Smith, *Studies in Creative Writing* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1933), 7.

Wunsch and Smith's pedagogy, of course, must have seemed particularly suited to Black Mountain College, where, in addition to constructing the school's Bauhaus-style Studies Building, students designed and built their own individual studies using local materials, and where in later years they foraged for firewood in what one alumnus describes as "Breughelesque bands of student woodsmen."[4]

In this chapter, I contend that the invocation of manual labor in literary craft books means to achieve several interrelated objectives, facilitating processes of aesthetic consolidation within a print culture characterized by increasingly fluid formal and generic categories. Moreover, while middlebrow craft books intended for a mass readership ultimately reinforce conservative cultural priorities, modernist craft books—such as those written by Pound and Gertrude Stein—appropriate the genre for uniquely radical ends. By mid-century, however, as the craft book becomes required reading within graduate creative writing programs, the genre functions to underwrite the growing cultural and economic authority of the institution housing those programs: the American research university. Tracing the endurance, in poetry crafts books in particular, of what I have termed an American Arts and Crafts "craft ideal," I show how an ethos which helped George Pierce Baker challenge the regnant utilitarian values of Harvard University comes to reinforce precisely those values within mid-century and postwar higher education. Craft rhetoric, I show, gets packaged at mid-century into an educational commodity—craft gets incorporated.

Examining dozens of literary craft books from the first decades of the twentieth century—a fraction of the whole, but representative—I argue in the first section of this chapter that the appeal to metaphors of housing construction contributed in profound ways to what Joseph Harrington has called "the institutional production of the poetic."[5] Specifically, such metaphors established and

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[4] Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 239.
[5] Joseph Harrington, *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 4.

triangulated a given genre's relation to an expanding literary marketplace. Whereas fiction craft books frame the genre as a form of labor fungible within broader literary and material economies, poetry craft books insist that poetic composition involves more than "mere craftsmanship," as one text puts it, figuring poetry as a spiritual expression facilitated by—though neither reducible to nor compromised by—technical facility.[6] In the poetry craft book, the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal finds new discursive life, with such texts balancing the writer's expressive labor with fidelity to technical standards like those enforced by pre-industrial guilds. That these texts return, at least rhetorically, to residual forms of craftsmanship during this period is hardly incidental; for the emergence of new industrial-corporate economies—what economic historians have variously referred to as "rationalized corporate structures"[7] or "managerial capitalism"[8] or a "new class" of "knowledge workers"[9]—depended to a large degree on the expropriation of technical knowledge formerly belonging to craft laborers. As Michael Denning summarizes, the "Taylorism of modernity" created "entire industries and classes built on 'mental labor' and the appropriation of the skills of the craftworker."[10] Like the American Arts and Crafts movement generally, poetry craft books served not merely as a cultural intervention, but as an economic critique of emergent "professional-managerial" values, a plea that labor remain both spiritually expressive and technically masterful.[11]

Though middlebrow poetry craft books also evince strong resistance to modernist experimentation, Pound and Stein appropriate the genre to levy a very similar economic critique, at

[6] Ethel M. Colson, *How To Write Poetry* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1919), 20.
[7] C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), 106.
[8] Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977), 1.
[9] Lawrence Peter King and Iván Szelényi, *Theories of the New Class: Intellectuals and Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), viii.
[10] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997), 38.
[11] Among these terms for conceptualizing the early twentieth-century economy, I most frequently employ the concept of "professional-managerial" work as defined by Barbara and John Ehrenreich. See especially Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," in *Between Labor and Capital*, ed. Pat Walker (Boston: South End Press, 1979) 12-26.

the same time interrogating and transforming the craft book to advance distinctly avant-garde objectives. In the second section of this chapter, I argue that, far from some rarefied retreat from mass culture, modernist craft books engage meaningfully with mass-cultural pedagogies, deploying the tropes and topoi of the genre to rethink the function of literature—indeed the very nature of language—within a degraded industrial-corporate regime. In making this claim, I follow scholars like Harrington, Lawrence Rainey, and Jennifer Wicke in contending that literary modernism was forged through tactical engagement with, rather than outright resistance to, mass American culture and those economic institutions that undergirded it.[12] Though these scholars and others have focused on the importance to modernism of anthologies and little magazines, I suggest that the critically neglected genre of the craft book played an equally pivotal role in sorting, sifting, and producing sometimes irreconcilable definitions of the poetic. This work—namely, the tendency to oppose poetry to wider literary and material economies—culminates in arguably the most influential of twentieth-century craft books: Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's 1938 *Understanding Poetry*. Extending the metaphors of housing construction found in earlier texts, Brooks and Warren argue that "the poet certainly [does] not draw up an analysis of his intention, a kind of blueprint, and then write the poem to specification." "It is only," they explain, "a very superficial view of the way the mind works that would cast the question into those terms."[13] It has become a commonplace that *Understanding Poetry* significantly impacted the theory, interpretation, and even production of mid-century American literature. Situating the text in the tradition of the creative writing craft book, however, I show that *Understanding Poetry* in fact constitutes a kind of literary-historical switching point, since the vast majority of postwar literary craft books figure poetry as precisely the kind of

[12] See Harrington, *Poetry and the Public*; Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); and Jennifer Wicke, *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, and Social Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), especially 1-11.

[13] Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1950), 335. I quote here and throughout from the second edition of *Understanding Poetry*, largely unchanged from the first.

labor that Brooks and Warren reject. In fact, poetry comes to look more and more like work—and not particularly spiritual work—as the practice of creative writing rotates into that institution most frequently castigated by Brooks and Warren: the university.

Analyzing one of the era's best-selling poetry craft books, Richard Hugo's 1979 *The Triggering Town*, I argue in the final section of this chapter that creative writing craft comes in the postwar era to consolidate the authority of elite educational institutions. More than merely a pedagogical "adjustment," as Mark McGurl claims—an institutional modification allowing as elusive an art as poetry to be taught in the first place—creative writing craft rewrites the university's promotion of professional-managerial values in the language of manual labor.[14] The MFA "workshop" peddles back that labor as craft pedagogies, soft skills necessary to the maintenance of a rising professional-managerial class. Whereas most scholarly accounts of creative writing eschew what we might think of as Foucauldian examination of the imbrication of knowledge and power, in this chapter—organized less around literary than generic institutions—I traverse quite wide historical territory in order to show the stakes involved in reconstructing the craft legacy of creative writing. By mid-century, the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal becomes, in warped form, an instrument for rewriting one economic practice in the language of another, just as postwar neoconservativism rewrites itself in the language of populism. I remain skeptical, though, that the incorporation of craft signals the inevitable entrenchment of the "workshop lyric," as the most common critique of the MFA holds.[15] Rather, by reading Hugo's own poetry for its disarticulation of a craft ideal, I show how the alignment of poetry and university opens discursive space for a postmodern poetics characterized by self-reflexive attention to its own institutional habitus.

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[14] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 93.

[15] As used as a term of critique, "workshop lyric" dates to 1990. See David Dooley, "The Contemporary Workshop Aesthetic," *The Hudson Review* 43, no. 2 (Summer, 1990), 260.

I. Early Twentieth-Century Craft Books

"Essentially a workshop": The Advertising Craft Book

As a genre, craft books were part of broader explosion across the early twentieth century in mass-produced cultural pedagogies, so-called "how-to" and "self-help" manuals marketed to upwardly mobile middle-class consumers. Though I focus on the literary craft book in particular, mass-cultural pedagogies could be found on virtually every conceivable undertaking, with such manuals especially popular in subject areas related to bodily care, cooking and domestic work, athletics and physical culture, and professional success, the latter exemplified in Dale Carnegie's best-selling *How to Win Friends & Influence People* (1936). In 1895, readers could learn social politesse in George Sandison's *How to Behave and How to Amuse: A Handy Manual of Etiquette and Parlor Games*. Readers in 1899 could brush up on urban farming in John H. Robinson's *Poultry-Craft: A Text Book for Poultry Keepers*. In 1924, aspiring bakers and party hosts could turn for reassurance to Fred Bauer's *Cake-art Craft: The Most Complete and Helpful Book on Cake Ornamenting Designs and Instructions Published*. Though the genre nearly lampoons itself, Pound made explicit the somewhat absurd premise of early twentieth-century mass-cultural pedagogies, an aspirational mode promising, as he put it, "how to seem to know it when you don't."[16]

From Henry James's 1884 "The Art of Fiction" to Clement Wood's 1936 *The Complete Rhyming Dictionary and Poet's Craft Book*, literary craft books supplied courses of instruction unavailable in traditional pedagogical settings. Accordingly, these texts frequently downplay the necessity of conventional education. In *The Advertising Man*, advertising executive Earnest Elmo Calkins recommends a "three-year course" in which aspiring advertisers serve successive apprenticeships on a small-town newspaper, in an urban retail store, and as a traveling salesman, all training toward

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[16] Ezra Pound, "How to Read," in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1954), 15.

what Calkins calls the "Doctor of Publicity."[17] In *How to Write Short Stories*, satirist Ring Lardner notes that "when you skim through the pages of high-class periodicals, you don't often find them cluttered up with […] boys or gals who win their phi beta skeleton keys." In fact, Lardner goes on, most authors "never went to no kind of a college, or if they did, they studied piano tuning or the barber trade."[18] These kinds of "apprenticeships"—of which simply reading a craft book was part—ostensibly opened the way toward professional authorship, with literary craft books helping consumers enter, navigate, and eventually master what Bartholomew Brinkman has called an emergent "culture of mass print."[19] One 1929 guide for consumers "who aspire to authorship" includes appendices with lists of "leading American authors of the nineteenth century," including information about college attended, age of first publication, and previous occupation. The same text includes style guides for major American magazines.[20] Another literary craft book, written in 1934 by magazine editor Arthur Sullivant Hoffman, reminds readers that "the market is not a market but many markets, each with its own specifications for stories."[21] The early twentieth-century literary craft book, this is to say, functions as one of those "intervenient institutions" which for a scholar like Rainey "connect[s] […] readerships to particular social structures."[22]

As I will show, poetry craft books stridently reject the kind of market determinism evidenced in craft books for fiction and advertising. Across genres, however, literary craft books deploy quite similar tropes, strategies, and topoi. The vast majority of craft books, for example, break down creative production into constitutive "craft" techniques—layout and ad design, dialogue and characterization, rhyme and imagery—and provide exercises and examples to reinforce these

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[17] See Earnest Elmo Calkins, *The Advertising Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), 156-159.
[18] Ring Lardner, *How to Write Short Stories* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), v.
[19] Bartholomew Brinkman, *Poetic Modernism in the Culture of Mass Print* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 7.
[20] See William Webster Ellsworth, *Creative Writing: A Guide for Those Who Aspire to Authorship* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1929).
[21] Arthur Sullivant Hoffman, *The Writing of Fiction* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1934), 8.
[22] Rainey, *Institutions*, 4.

techniques. At the same time, craft books insist that writers internalize such techniques so that they function unconsciously during the writing process. As we will see, craft books develop this line of thinking through one specific metaphor, appealing to the newly fashionable field of athletics and physical culture. Craft concerns "should not occupy the writer's mind […] in the throes of composition," writes George Burton Hotchkiss. "In this respect he is like the golfer in a tournament match, who should not be giving attention to little details of grip, stance, and swing, but should be concentrating on the one task of hitting the ball straight toward the hole."[23] In *How to Write Advertising*, likewise, Howard Allan Barton reminds would-be writers that "[i]t takes a golfer twelve years to learn how to play golf and twelve more years to *forget* what he has learned."[24] In training consumers toward professional authorship, that is, literary craft books invoke a vogue for physical culture that was also—like industry journals and trade organizations—increasingly integral to commercial deal brokerage and professional networking.

In offering access to this professional strata of authorship, craft books operate almost universally on the assumption of a level playing field, ignoring determinants of class and culture that were—and remain—hugely influential in sorting out literary losers and winners. "A rejection is not a haphazard act," cautions Edwin Wildman in his multi-genre *Writing to Sell*. "It means something definite: your manuscript needs fixing, rewriting, or it was sent to the wrong market, or it is not good enough to sell anywhere."[25] After his initial apprenticeship, Calkins maintains, "the story is merely one of rise in advertising work, until the unwilling recruit is now at the head of one of the leading agencies of the country."[26] In the same way that booming advertising industries haloed the mass-produced commodity with an aura of social prestige—one bought, then as now, not a product itself but the *savoir faire* associated with it—literary craft books appealed to consumers' desire for upward mobility

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[23] George Burton Hotchkiss, *Advertising Copy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 220.
[24] Howard Allan Barton, *How to Write Advertising* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1925), 124.
[25] Edwin Wildman, *Writing to Sell* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1923), 212.
[26] Calkins, *The Advertising Man*, 123-124.

while side-stepping structural barriers to professional success.[27] All that was required for amateur authors to succeed, these texts maintained, was hard work—on which, more later—and familiarity with those codes and vocabularies employed by professionals. Accordingly, almost all craft books instruct readers on how to prepare manuscripts for submission, decoding otherwise inscrutable practices into practical, step-by-step advice. Wildman, for instance, instructs readers to "use light-weight unlined bond paper of regular manuscript (not legal) size." "Clip the sheets together with an ordinary Collete, or regular steel clip," he goes on, "or fasten them together with brass fasteners through a punched hole."[28] Likewise, almost all craft books introduce readers to the technical patois of literary craftsmanship, from identifying "dactylic movement with anapestic phrasing" to explaining "'the dramatic method' as a difference of 'showing vs. telling.'"[29] This practice holds for advertising craft books as well. "An *em* is any given body of an individual square of any size of type," write Raymond Hawley and James Barton Zabin in *Understanding Advertising*. "An *agate* is the name of a 5 ½-point type."[30]

Though advertising craft books may appear "extraliterary" in relation to craft books dedicated to fiction and poetry, they demonstrate how important the genre as a whole was to the kinds of economic professionalization that prevailed across the early twentieth-century.[31] On one hand, this induction of readers into professional discourses suggests the affinity of craft books with those texts that circulated for centuries among pre-industrial guilds, examined at length in the introduction to this project. On the other hand, the language of professionalism bespeaks the genre's more recent

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[27] On the appeal to upward mobility in early twentieth-century advertising, see Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 200-218 and Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 79-90.

[28] Wildman, *Writing to Sell*, 274.

[29] C. E. Andrews, *The Writing and Reading of Verse* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1929), 79. Hoffman, *The Writing of Fiction*, 348.

[30] Raymond Hawley and James Barton Zabin, *Understanding Advertising* (New York: The Gregg Publishing Company, 1931), 55.

[31] Expanded treatment of early twentieth-century advertising is beyond the scope of this chapter, but, for a richer history of the industry, see especially: T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*; and Ohmann, *Selling Culture*.

orientation toward—and its role in creating—a new class of salaried "knowledge workers," a demographic whose ultimate function, as Barbara and John Ehrenreich explain, was "the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations."[32] Advertising craft books' invocation of professional rhetoric also contributed to the instability of formal and generic boundaries within early twentieth-century print culture. For despite its pretension to scientific rationality, the newly conceived advertising "campaign" aspired equally to literary status, drawing on techniques of both poetry and fiction to secure consumer interest. Advertising was "literature which compels Action," one Chicago agency maintained.[33] "The same people who thrill and suffer and cry and grow hot-tempered over the tempests and joys of fiction," a *Printers' Ink* columnist held, "are touched and influenced by the heart which is put into advertising."[34] The literary aspirations of advertising are a dominant motif in advertising craft books marketed to would-be professionals. Lamenting the prestige attached to market research, Hawley and Zabin insist that "human emotions […] defy classification," urging amateur copywriters to turn to literature for "the human element, the milk of human kindness—the whipped cream of charm."[35] Hotchkiss even touts advertising as the most elevated of literary forms, supreme especially over the discourses of modernism and naturalism. "[I]t is not necessarily lower than pure literature," Hotchkiss wrote of advertising copy.

> In some ways it is just as pure. Purer perhaps in that it contains less pessimism, less cynicism, less smut. It seldom panders to the prurient instincts. It cannot justly be charged with impairing morals. Even when it stimulates public demand by emotional appeals of the lower sort, it is not wholly bad, for human wants are not only the impulse to human progress but the measure of civilization.[36]

Testifying succinctly to the entrenchment of a professional culture of mass print—that is, to the

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32 On the idea of "knowledge work" see Peter Drucker, *Landmarks of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1959). Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," 12.

33 Quoted in Ohmann, *Selling Culture*, 109.

34 Quoted in Elspeth H. Brown, "Rationalizing Consumption: Lejaren à Hiller and the Origins of American Advertising Photography, 1913-1924," in *Cultures of Commerce: Representation and American Business Culture, 1877-1960*, eds. Elspeth H. Brown, Catherine Gudis, and Marina Moskowitz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 82.

35 Hawley and Zabin, *Understanding Advertising*, 38.

36 Hotchkiss, *Advertising Copy*, 427-428.

blurring of boundaries between literature and commerce—Hotchkiss's polemic points equally to the blurring of formal and generic boundaries within that culture.

Across advertising craft books the most frequently invoked comparison to advertising is fiction, with Hotchkiss himself declaring that "copy should be as interesting as the material for which people buy the publication."[37] Because of its position alongside short stories and novelettes, advertising had a greater likelihood of retaining consumers' interest if it employed narrative form, keeping consumers in a consistent frame of mind across multiple literary and quasi-literary modes. Trade characters like Aunt Jemima and the Quaker of Quaker Oats constitute a direct legacy of this philosophy, as does the predominance of narratives in which an unnamed protagonist overcomes obstacles like halitosis, malnourishment, body odor, fatigue, or unpopularity. Neither was poetry, however, without instructive value for would-be advertisers, particularly in the creation of slogans, jingles, and other text that might attract more attention than traditional blocked copy. Hotchkiss's own treatise on "catalytic copy," for example, shades quickly into instruction in poetic meter, a reminder that "important words and syllables demand an accent" and that lines too heavily accented are "as bad for the purposes of an advertising jingle as [they are] for poetry."[38] As other scholars have pointed out, advertising craft books frequently emphasize clarity and exactness of language in ways similar to Pound's imagist credos. While Pound urges "direct treatment of the 'thing,'" Barton advises "clear thought, clear expression of that thought; original thought and vigorous treatment of that thought."[39] Pound's "go in fear of abstractions," likewise, becomes Kenneth Goode's "absolute horror of words that don't spark-tingle—buzz—flash."[40]

Yet if advertising craft books move the profession toward literary arts like fiction—and to a

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[37] Ibid., 11.
[38] Ibid., 406, 407.
[39] Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect," in *Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism*, ed. Garrick Davis (Athens: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 2008), 185. Barton, *How to Write Advertising*, 38.
[40] Pound, "A Retrospect," 185. Kenneth Goode, *Manual of Modern Advertising* (New York: Greenberg, 1932), 142.

lesser extent poetry—they also insist that the language of advertising is *useful*, distinguishing properly literary writing from "art for art's sake" aestheticism. Advertising may have been literature, but it was not modernism. Barton, for instance, discourages amateur advertisers who see in the profession merely "the glitter and glamor of Bohemia." For such pretenders, "[t]he Atlantic Monthly, Des Imagistes, Wedgwood Pottery and the Moscow Art Players" constituted the "chief topics of conversation." And Barton was not "going to take your time in emphasizing the absurdity of this conception of advertising."[41] Writing in *Printers' Ink* in 1927, Hawley associates modernism with an effeminate dandyism sapped of the potency necessary to snare consumers. "As advertising progressed […] it put on the high hat, carried a stick, and went abroad garbed in the raiment of art," Hawley objected. "At times, it became so artistic that it hid its virility, missed its message, and occasionally became so beclouded that its own parents started wondering whose child it really was."[42] One advertising executive expressed succinctly this widespread resistance to aesthetic and personal experimentation. The Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn agency was no "scenic background for a Personality," he warned, but "essentially a workshop," language consonant with an evolving—and increasingly rationalized—industrial-corporate regime. Like other early twentieth-century industries underwritten by professional-managerial values, American advertising was indeed a "workshop." The craft book was its text.

"Mere craftsmanship": Fiction and Poetry Craft Books

Just as advertising craft books peddled the techniques of literary fiction, so too did fiction craft books market themselves as useful pedagogies for would-be advertisers, soliciting ad execs and other professionals interested "in story-telling as it relates to […] publicity work in your own line of

[41] Barton, *How to Write Advertising*, 53.
[42] Quoted in Hawley and Zabin, *Understanding Advertising*, 35.

business."[43] In his 1921 *How To Write Stories*, Columbia journalism professor Walter B. Pitkin offers prospective writers not simply exercises in fiction craftsmanship, but training in literary imagination, cultivating a mode of thought fungible across professions. Imagination, Pitkin writes "is indispensable to success in business and all the other practical affairs of life."

> The manager of a factory is always having to think of tomorrow and next year; where he will find workmen for the new wing that will be completed next March; what he will do in case the machines for the new wing are not delivered on schedule.

A prolific author of self-help manuals with titles like *Life Begins at 40* and *The Psychology of Happiness*, Pitkin believed that both the fiction writer and financier "deal[t] in futures," his pun pointing to the ways in which fiction writing was becoming rapidly professionalized—and financialized—during the first decades of the twentieth century.[44] As in advertising, that process was facilitated by the booming genre of the fiction craft book. As craft book authors like Pitkin well understood, amateur writers wanted access to expanding literary economies, a marketplace of print culture increasingly lucrative not only because advertising allowed for higher payment rates, but because of the potential windfall from film and syndication rights. Such rights held out tantalizing hope for real-life rags-to-riches stories of the kind that, in fictional form, so often filled venues like *Munsey's*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Fiction craft books supplied that access—or claimed to. "Study the fiction market as closely and as persistently as a Wall Street broker studies the stock market," Pitkin recommended.[45] And millions of consumers did.

Geared toward the production of literary commodities destined for mass-market circulation, fiction craft books, like the one written by Black Mountain teacher Robert Wunsch, insistently invoke metaphors of housing construction to instruct would-be writers in their craft. In his influential *The House of Fiction*, Henry James describes the "radiating and ramifying corridors" in the

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[43] Walter B. Pitkin, *How To Write Stories* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921), 3.
[44] Ibid., 18.
[45] Ibid., 289.

prose of Honoré de Balzac, contending that to read the French novelist is to "walk with him in the great glazed gallery of his thought."[46] Edith Wharton develops a similar metaphor in her 1925 *The Writing of Fiction*, discussing narrative structure as the "dovetailing of impossible incidents" and suggesting, with respect to point-of-view, that "[i]t should be the story-teller's first care to choose this reflecting mind deliberately, as one would choose a building-site, or decide upon the orientation of one's house."[47] Intriguingly, Wharton reverses this metaphor in her earlier *The Decoration of Houses*, a craft book on architecture and interior design she co-authored with Ogden Codman, Jr. "A large unbroken sheet of plate-glass interrupts the decorative scheme of the room," Wharton describes "just as in verse, if the distances between the rhymes are so great that the ear cannot connect them, the continuity of sound is interrupted."[48] For proto-modernists like Wharton and James, invocations of housing construction reflect a broader effort to pare away superfluous ornament in favor of a cleaner, more formalistic style; in both architecture and literature, for instance, Wharton values what she calls "fitness of proportion" and "the relation of voids to masses."[49]

Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, "the house as such was being rethought," as Bill Brown has argued, and this rethinking carried over not only into proto-modernist craft books but to craft books produced for more popular audiences as well.[50] The latter, of course, invoke housing construction less as part of a stylistic reformation than as an easily comprehensible metaphor, though at times these figurations become so elaborate that vehicle overtakes tenor, comprehension yielding to confusion. "The writer of fiction is doing the same thing as the man who built a house from scattered stones," asserts Hoffman in *The Writing of Fiction*.

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[46] Henry James, *The House of Fiction* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957), 72, 74.
[47] Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), 46.
[48] Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr. *The Decoration of Houses* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), 67.
[49] Ibid., 19, xix.
[50] Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 143.

> Always he must plan and build according to natural laws. He can pile stones one on top of another for walls, but for a roof gravity makes him employ the principle of an arch or use beams. […] Nor can he set causes at work without getting their results; the weight of too many stones over a window-beam will crush it. To keep out the rain he must provide something that, by natural law, will turn the rain aside.[51]

It is difficult to discern precisely where Hoffman's analogy links up with the actual practice of writing. Yet Hoffman concludes his craft book with a remarkable twist on this constructivist ethos. "What we are really doing," he argues, "is building something *within the reader*—creating in him a carefully arranged and controlled flow or movement of interests and feelings, beginning with those aroused by your initial conditions."

> It is the reader upon whom you are really working, not upon your material and its selection and arrangement. Material and arrangement, plot and structure, are only means to an end—tools. The reader is the clay you model, however much care you must give to the fashioning and using of your tools.[52]

This is an astounding passage. If advertising craft books assert the proximity of advertising to fiction, Hoffman suggests the ways in which mass-market fiction attained equally to advertising's psychic manipulation of the consumer. Metaphors of housing construction thus refer not simply to the brick and mortar of literary structure, but to a kind of virtual structure within the mind of the reader—a mansion of affect and attitude, a house of feeling.[53]

Whereas fiction craft books frame novel and short story writing as rigorous but potentially remunerative labor, craft books in poetry extricate poetic production, at least rhetorically, from broader literary and material economies. As craft books figure it, poetry involves no "mere craftsmanship," but intensive literary labor *plus* an immaterial spiritual aspect.[54] Embodying an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal, the vision of poetry articulated in poetry craft books balances

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[51] Hoffman, *The Writing of Fiction*, 46.
[52] Ibid., 214. [emphasis mine]
[53] Hoffman even imagines rationalizing fiction through the same kind of market research recently pioneered by advertising agencies like BBDO. "Comprehensive data on actual reader reaction would be particularly valuable," Hoffman muses, "in adding to our knowledge of the degree of power of visualizing, and of other sensory responses of the imagination." See Ibid., xvii.
[54] Colson, *How to Write Poetry*, 20.

technical mastery and spiritual expression—like saintly relics, poetry possesses a surplus value beyond its material thingness. Metaphors of labor and laborers, if not of housing construction, play an integral role in such thinking. "Practice poetry all you will," Ethel M. Colson writes in her 1919 *How to Write Poetry*, "indulge in all the poetic craft-work you desire […] but never imagine that you are writing poetry unless the poem insists upon being written, the song, at least in the beginning, insists upon singing itself."[55] In his 1929 *The Craft of Poetry*, Clement Wood maintains that "[v]erse can be manufactured at any time," turned out in "yards and yards […] in any poetic feet desired." "Poetry," Wood stipulates, "comes differently."[56] And creative writing teacher Brenda Ueland jests in *If You Want to Write…* that "at the time of the Renaissance, all gentlemen wrote sonnets. They did not think of getting them in the *Woman's Home Companion*."[57] As Ueland's rhetoric suggests, the effort to cordon off poetry from the literary marketplace renders poetry craft books part of what Janice Radway terms a "discourse of protectionism" prevalent within early twentieth-century cultural pedagogies. Most conspicuous in middlebrow initiatives like Harry Scherman's "Book of the Month Club," protectionist pedagogies restricted "the definition of the literary" by creating "safe spaces set apart from the commercial hustle and bustle of the workaday world."[58] The poetry craft book occupies precisely that middlebrow space, preserving traditional cultural values while disseminating those values to a mass readership. In this sense, the genre is inherently self-contradictory.

While figurations of poetry as a spiritual proposition were widespread, Canadian poet Bliss Carman's 1908 craft book *The Poetry of Life* offers perhaps the most thorough treatment of poetry as a form of spiritualized labor. To begin with, Carman follows generic convention in extricating poetry from the literary marketplace, describing the "spiritual energy" of poetry as outweighing "the

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[55] Ibid., 120.
[56] Clement Wood, *The Craft of Poetry* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc. 1929), 22-23.
[57] Brenda Ueland, *If You Want to Write…* (St. Paul: The Schubert Club, 1984), 17.
[58] Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 139-140.

little gain, the jingling reward of gold." For Carman, mass-marketed literature represented "the worthless contrivance of journeymen," cranked out by mere "fabricators," a conviction borne out in Carman's own reliance on reading tours and old-fashioned patronage networks—rather than writing novels, short stories, or popular journalism—to support himself.[59] Where *The Poetry of Life* moves beyond generic convention is in the systematic taxonomy of labor that Carman develops, a hierarchical classification which positions poetry as the apotheosis of—emerging out of, but fundamentally transforming—other forms of manual labor. At the base of Carman's hierarchy are "primitive industries" like hunting, fishing, and agriculture, occupations that correspond to what Hannah Arendt calls the labor of "*animal laborans*"—strictly utilitarian work bound to the world of necessity.[60] On the next rung are occupations requiring greater ingenuity, tasks like weaving, housing construction, and metal-working. For Arendt, these skills constitute the work of "*homo faber*," that figure who creates objects of permanence, beauty, and durability.[61] Since this mode of labor, for Carman, "embod[ies] some intentional expression of human life," it contains in inchoate form "the essential quality" of artistic practices.

As Carman understood it, however, the degraded character of industrial-corporate labor disrupted this progression from the industrial to the fine arts. "To produce anything worthwhile," Carman argued, "either in the fine or the industrial arts, it is necessary that the worker should not be hurried, and should have some freedom to do his work in his own way, according to his own fancy and enjoyment." Contemporary workers, in contrast, took "neither pleasure nor pride in [their] work; and consequently that work can have no artistic value."[62] As in Deweyan progressive education, at the heart of Carman's taxonomy was the desire to preserve hand labor as a mode of making and knowing, an epistemology. "If a man has never driven a nail in his life, nor built a fire,

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[59] Bliss Carman, *The Poetry of Life* (Boston: L.C. Page & Company, 1908), 3-4, 7.
[60] See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 144-152.
[61] See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 153-158.
[62] Carman, *The Poetry of Life*, 35-37.

nor turned a furrow," Carman maintained,

> nor picked a barrel of apples, nor fetched home the cows, nor pulled an oar, nor reefed a sail, nor saddled a horse, nor carried home a bundle of groceries from town, nor weeded the garden, nor been lost in the woods, nor nursed a friend, nor barked his shin, nor been thankful for a free lunch, do you think it is likely he will have anything to say to you and me that will be worth listening to?[63]

Carman himself did not. In opposing poetry to the kinds of labor associated with literary and material economies, *The Poetry of Life*—like many poetry craft books from this period—translates into a generic and literary historical context that craft ideal first associated with the American Arts and Crafts movement. Meaningful poetry is rooted in "technique" and "execution," Carman argued, but expressed interior, spiritual concerns as well, eschewing more material objectives; poetry, as Carman put it, "record[s] for us the noblest aspirations of the human spirit, the ultimate reach of the soul after goodness."[64] Here in concise form is a craft ideal which reconciled adherence to technical standards with the craftsman's engaged, expressive labor.

The extrication of poetry from the literary marketplace was not, of course, original to early twentieth century craft books. In fact, one of the very earliest poetry craft books engages a remarkably similar line of thinking. In his nineteenth-century B.C. *Ars Poetica*, Horace asks his readers whether, "once this rust and care for cash has tainted the soul," they can "hope for poems to be written that deserve preserving with cedar oil and keeping safe in smooth cypress." In "Letter to Augustus," likewise, Horace suggests that only "badly-turned verse" belongs in "the quarter where they sell perfumes and scent and pepper and everything else that gets wrapped up in worthless literature."[65] This might easily be a description of the literary marketplace to which poetry craft books like Carman's objected, Horace's commercial "quarter" an ancient corollary to a culture of

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[63] Ibid., 63, 68-69.

[64] Ibid., 117.

[65] Horace, "The Art of Poetry," in *Classical Literary Critcism*, eds. and trans. D. A. Russell and Michael Winterbottom (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 106. Horace, "Letter to Augustus," in *Classical Literary Critcism*, eds. and trans. D. A. Russell and Michael Winterbottom (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 97.

mass print in which literature and advertising had been drawn increasingly nearer. For Carman as for Horace, such "literature" resembled nothing so much as wrapping paper.

II. Modernist and Postwar Poetry Craft Books

"Grammar makes a parlor": The Modernist Craft Book

Part of what Radway identifies as a "middlebrow" reaction against the commodification of literary culture, poetry craft books reacted, too, against an aesthetic mode which ostensibly aligned itself with the literary marketplace. As such craft books maintained, modernist experimentation privileged the merely transitory aspects of human experience over the eternal and spiritual. "Think how much of modern art is characterized by nothing but form," Carman proposed to readers, "how devoid it is of ideas, how lacking in anything like passionate enthusiasm."[66] Ethel M. Colson agreed, describing "strange and sad monstrosities [like] 'cubist' painting and 'toneless' music" which "have been inflicted upon a curious and long-suffering public."[67] Coincident with the extrication of poetry from an evolving industrial-corporate regime, poetry craft books sought to parse the relationship between "genteel" nineteenth-century formalism and poetic modernism, defining these terms in partisan fashion and staking out cultural terrain for them at a time when that terrain was sharply contested.[68]

Despite these efforts, modernists Pound and Stein turned to the craft book to launch an economic critique similar to the one levied in the pages of their middlebrow counterparts. At the same time, modernist craft books depart in significant ways from standard mass-cultural pedagogies, invoking shared metaphors of manual labor—like housing construction—while adapting those

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[66] Carman, *The Poetry of Life*, 34.
[67] Colson, *How to Write Poetry*, 46.
[68] My description of nineteenth-century formalism is informed by David Perkins's description of the mode as a "genteel tradition." See Perkins, David, *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1976), 100-133.

metaphors to suit uniquely avant-garde imperatives. For Pound, the poetry craft book provided a medium through which to shape and address a kind of counter-public that might, like medieval scribes hunched over Tertullian, preserve Western literary culture within an ever more economistic society. For Stein, in turn, the genre served as a platform for a theory of language and literary production irreducible to rationalized modes of language use. Following the lead of Brinkman, Harrington, Rainey, Wicke, and others, I argue in this section that literary modernism constituted less a repudiation of and retreat from a "culture of mass print" than tactical engagement with mass media, aesthetics, and institutions. The "ambiguous achievement" of modernism, Rainey urges, was "to forge within it a strange and unprecedented space for cultural production, one that […] continued to overlap and intersect with the public realm in a variety of contradictory ways."[69] One site for this intersection was the modernist craft book.

Pound himself addresses the popularity of that genre when he writes in his own craft book, the 1934 *ABC of Reading*, that the "dirtiest book in our language is a quite astute manual telling people how to earn money by writing." The fact that contemporary craft books "advocate the maximum possible intellectual degradation," however, "should not blind one to its constructive merits."[70] For Pound, early twentieth-century craft books may have offered useful lessons in "construction," but they remained tainted with the materialism of the marketplace, an argument that finds expression in Pound's own frequent invocations of housing construction. "A carpenter can put boards together, but a good carpenter would know seasoned wood from green," Pound insists, adapting Cavalcanti to pun on American money—and perhaps anticipating Josef Albers's notion of "thinking in wood," discussed above. And Pound goes on: "The mere questions of constructing and assembling clauses, of parsing and grammar are not enough. Such study ended in a game of oratory, now parodied in

[69] Rainey, *Institutions*, 3.
[70] Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1934), 89.

detective stories when they give the learned counsel's summing-up."[71] As his allusion to the popular genre of detective fiction suggests, Pound is concerned in *ABC* to preserve poetry from degraded literary habits and stultified ways of thinking, inclinations that entail from the misplaced priorities of a culturally bankrupt civilization. "The modern poet is expected to holloa his verses down a speaking tube to the editors of cheap magazines," Pound writes, decrying a society in which the primary impetus for literary production is economic.[72] "Many writers need or want money," he writes in *ABC*. "These writers could be cured by an application of banknotes."[73]

Of course, *ABC* bills itself as a primer in "reading," not as a craft book in literary production. For Pound, however, respectable poetic craftsmanship begins with careful study of commendable models, so that even when studying literature *as such* readers at the same time internalize literary technique. "The proper METHOD for studying poetry," Pound writes, is "COMPARISON of one 'slide' or specimen with another," a methodology he attributes to the empiricism of contemporary biologists like Louis Agassiz.[74] Accordingly, the entire second half of *ABC* consists of "exhibits" implicitly intended for would-be writers. Describing readers' use of these "exhibits," Pound once again invokes metaphors of housing construction, explaining that "certain verbal manifestations *can* be employed as measures, T squares, voltmeters" that might "enable a man to estimate writing in general."[75] Once able to "estimate" writing, moreover, readers are encouraged in exercises at the end of each section to translate those skills into their own writing. One multi-step exercise in "metrical writing," for instance, begins by instructing readers to "write in the meter of any poem [one] likes." After asking them to copy out lyrics to a "well-known tune," Pound tasks readers with writing new lyrics "in such a way that the words will not be distorted when one sings them."[76]

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[71] Ibid., 73.
[72] Pound, "A Retrospect," 189.
[73] Pound, *ABC*, 194.
[74] Ibid., 17.
[75] Ibid., 87. [emphasis in original]
[76] Ibid., 68.

Though Pound employs such exercises in the service of his own cultural project, both exercises and "exhibits" were common within the craft book genre. And just as craft books invoke physical culture, especially golf, as an analog for literary composition, Pound turns to that other increasingly "professional" athletic endeavor: tennis. "The writer need no more think about EVERY DETAIL than [William "Big Bill"] Tilden needs to think about the position of every muscle in every stroke of his tennis," Pound reminds readers. "The force, the draw, etc., follow the main intention, without damage to the unity of the act."[77] Despite his protests against the "dirtiest book" that was the literary craft book, Pound clearly appropriated the popular genre—interrogated it, transformed it—in order to carry out a distinctly non-popular cultural and economic project.

Integral to that project, I've suggested, was the opposition of poetry to broader literary and material economies, a war of position Pound wages through metaphors of manual labor. While such rhetoric is widespread in poetry craft books, Pound amplifies the stakes by arguing that the well-wroughtedness of poetry is essential to Western civilization. "If a nation's literature declines," Pound famously writes, "the nation atrophies and decays."[78] In *ABC* Pound refigures this decay by invoking comparisons to material invention, practices of making by a craft master. If cultural production begins when a "master invents a gadget," as Pound describes, the degradation of that gadget sets in immediately, as apprentices employ it "less skillfully than the master" before it falls into the hands of the "paste-headed pedagogue or theorist." Then, Pound says, "a bureaucracy is endowed and the pin-headed secretariat attacks every new genius and every form of inventiveness for not obeying the law." Pound concludes by reiterating that "great savants ignore, quite often, the idiocies […] of the teaching profession."[79] A critique of the MFA industry *avant la lettre*, perhaps, Pound's cultural schematic helps us see *ABC* as an intervention to preserve the clarity and vigor of

[77] Ibid., 75.
[78] Ibid., 200.
[79] Ibid., 200.

linguistic craftsmanship. What Pound values in medieval troubadour poetry, for instance, is craft superior to the point that it conceals its own labor. "That 'whole art,'" Pound argues, "consisted in putting together about six strophes of poesy so that the words and the tune should be welded together without joint and without wem. The best smith, as Dante called Arnaut Daniel, made the birds SING IN HIS WORDS."[80] Pound's allusion is a subtle in-joke in literary genealogy, for it is Dante's description of Daniel in *Purgatorio*—recycled by Pound as the title for his own chapter on the troubadour in *The Spirit of Romance* (1910)—from which Eliot draws his description of Pound as "*il migglior fabbro*." And neither was Pound's investment in craftsmanship merely metaphorical. After settling in, in December of 1921, to his ground-floor studio in Montparnasse, Pound immediately began construction on a set of armchairs as well as two small tables, bringing with him to Paris another triangular typing table he had built in London. It was around this time that Pound began editing Eliot's typescript copy of "The Waste Land," radically trimming, re-shaping, and polishing the poem into final form. Pound, that is, earned his reputation as "the better craftsman" on furniture he himself had crafted.[81]

Though Pound's privileging of traditional cultural priorities might be said to resemble the middlebrow "discourse of protectionism" found within more popular literary craft books, *ABC* constitutes part not so much of a middlebrow as an aristocratic—even, perhaps, fascistic—cultural project. Inspired, as biographer Ira Nadel explains, by Mussolini's effective manipulation of the Italian press, Pound looked to the craft book as a way to disseminate his cultural and economic program to a wider audience of American elites.[82] In addition to *ABC of Reading*, Pound adopted the genre for his 1933 *ABC of Economics* and employed a similar primer-like title for *Make It New*, an essay collection published in 1934. While Nadel attributes Pound's fascination with the craft book

[80] Ibid., 53.
[81] See Ira Nadel, *Ezra Pound: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 95-96.
[82] Ibid., 138.

to his interest in A. R. Orage's *Alphabet of Economics*, published two decades earlier, so keen a cultural critic would no doubt have remarked the contemporary boom in mass-cultural pedagogies, likely lamenting volumes such as *Spade-craft, or How to be a Gardener* (1915), *How to Reduce: New Waistlines for Old* (1920), and *The ABC of Business Insurance Trusts* (1936). Yet the craft book was only one genre among many into which Pound channeled his missionary zeal. His statement that "literature is news that STAYS news," original to *ABC*, constitutes merely more epigrammatic form of a concern with cultural decline that runs throughout Pound's work from this period, including in essays, operas, radio broadcasts, a newspaper column, and limited-admission lectures.[83] In his 1934 essay "The Teacher's Mission," for instance, Pound describes the "watering down" of literature across both historical and geographical distances. "The whole system of intercommunications via the printed page in America is now, and has been, a mere matter of successive *dilutions* of knowledge," he writes.

> When some European got tired of an idea he wrote it down, it was printed after an interval, and it was reviewed in, say, London, by a hurried and harassed reviewer, usually lazy, almost always indifferent. The London periodicals were rediluted by still more hurried and usually incompetent New York reviewers, and their 'opinion' was dispersed and watered down via American trade distribution.[84]

As demonstrated in this passage, Pound's tone across these various initiatives was hortatory, his didacticism focused on "identifying error," as Nadel describes, and thereby hastening cultural and economic transformation.[85] Pound himself attributes the critical tone of *ABC* to precisely this pedagogical function, explaining that "the present pages should be impersonal enough to serve as a textbook," one designed specifically—like many other craft books from the era—to supply a course of instruction unavailable in conventional educational settings.[86]

Yet Pound was not alone in turning to the craft book genre to carry out a project in cultural

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83 Pound, *ABC*, 29.
84 Ezra Pound, "The Teacher's Mission," in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1954), 60.
85 Nadel, *Ezra Pound*, 149.
86 Pound, *ABC*, 11.

recuperation. In her 1931 *How to Write*, Gertrude Stein follows generic convention in figuring poetry as a form of labor opposed to more commercial modes of reading and writing. Though metaphors of housing construction are integral to her argument, Stein radically reconceives the implications of these metaphors, re-figuring poetry as an architectural practice that proceeds not by reference to pre-designed blueprints, but by fidelity to one's self in the moment, what Stein calls an "obedience to intermittence."[87] It is this disciplined, technically rigorous expression of interiority, I suggest, that aligns Stein with an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal, an ethos still very much alive in cultural and economic discourse—including, appropriately, in the "craft book"—nearly two decades after the collapse of those institutions that shaped it. Whereas middlebrow poetry craft books spiritualized this ideal—finding in expression an almost holy or sacrosanct devotion—Stein eschews spiritual rhetoric in order to hone a materialist conception of language and literary production. In both its middlebrow and modernist guises, this is to say, the poetry craft book intervenes during this period in a broader confrontation between craft epistemologies and those forms of professional-managerial labor which sought to rationalize them. For Stein, I show, such incursions held major implications for the kinds of language-use imaginable under an industrial-corporate regime.

Published in a limited edition of 1,000 copies, *How to Write* organizes itself along the lines of early twentieth-century grammar textbooks, with successive sections dedicated, for example, to "Sentences," "Sentences and Paragraphs," "Grammar," and "Forensics." Like much of Stein's writing from this period, the craft book develops an aesthetic of the "continuous present," meditatively defining and redefining these and other key terms in a circular form in which ideas recur, build up, and break down across a long, linguistically dense text. Far from an accessible primer for mass audiences, *How to Write* is one of Stein's most challenging pieces of writing, its idiosyncratic difficulty causing the few critics who engage it to read it as merely a spoof of the craft

[87] Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1975), 30.

book genre.[88] In contrast, I argue that the text levels serious and significant claims about labor, language, and the relation of both to broader literary and material economies. Stein's craft book does, however, spoof one popular genre: the sentimental romance. Across Stein's abstract, highly theoretical language runs the faint suggestion of a love plot, *How to Write* following a newly married couple who, as a kind of leitmotif, pop in and out of a dizzying text in which it is otherwise quite difficult to orient oneself. Stein introduces this love plot in the craft book's opening section, "Saving the Sentence," where we find the couple at the outset of their new life. "Betty is leaving her home or at any rate where she is," Stein writes. "What is it that they would have what is it that they would have gotten if they had it. Hers and his the houses are hers and his the valley is hers and his." Those houses recur throughout *How to Write*, serving as an architectural metaphor for the stability of the couple's union and, as I will show, a symbol of language itself. "No doubt may be with them," Stein declares of her newlyweds.

> No doubt may be with them no doubt may be.
> May be with them may be. May be they may be.
> It is easy to hide a hope.
> Have meant.
> A little goes a long way.
> How many houses are there.
> There is a house near where there is a bridge. They were willing to be there.
> Hours out of it in adjoining them.[89]

In describing the young couple's houses, Stein is especially fascinated with architectural and carpentry joints, those cruxes where the whole edifice—house, couple, language—hold most tightly together. Puns on and versions of "jointure" fill *How to Write* in the same way that the names of rivers run through the "Anna Livia Plurabelle" chapter of *Finnegans Wake*, often loosed from precise reference or unstable in their signification. "[V]ery to a partly joined disturb," Stein writes, later

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[88] See Sharon J. Kirsch, "'Suppose a grammar uses invention': Gertrude Stein's Theory of Rhetorical Grammar," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (July, 2008), 294 and Rosalind Miller, *Gertrude Stein: Form and Intelligibility* (New York: Exposition Press, 1949), 11.
[89] Stein, *How to Write*, 20.

describing "next how in favor it makes planks for be like taken do join reigned for as likely plating donkey minded it for meaning." Stein even possesses a particular fondness for dovetail joints, as when she writes that "in a case there is unit do for at all peculiar for a polite with all a classing dovetail in totality."[90]

Even in context, such phrases are difficult to parse, but taken cumulatively they suggest a through-line concern with metaphors of housing construction and with the social conditions in which construction takes place. While contemporary craft books deploy similar figurations in relatively straightforward fashion—i.e. housing construction stands in for literary construction—Stein, as usual, is up to something much more complex. Specifically, the houses that run throughout *How to Write* represent the broader linguistic system, the grammar, that allows for human sociality; for Stein, the house constitutes a space from which speech can emerge. Or, as Stein figures it, "grammar makes a parlor." Stein's newlyweds do not construct their own house, therefore, because "[g]rammar is without their house which has been built without them." As Stein puns, houses may have an "address," but they are first and foremost spaces for an "address," the "parlor" above all a space to speak, in French "*parler*."[91] Stein's metaphor is apposite given that her own house at 27 Rue de Fleurus operated as precisely such a space; among Stein's visitors there, as has been abundantly documented, were painters Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, socialites Nancy Cunard and Lady Ottoline Morrel, and Lost Generation icons Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald—a talkative parlor indeed. Moreover, Stein's house was furnished with Renaissance-era pieces likely constructed with dovetail joinery, an ancient construction practice that gained widespread circulation as the art of cabinet-making developed in fifteenth-century Italy.[92] Part of Stein's suspicion of Pound, in fact—

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[90] Ibid., 44, 46, 45.
[91] Ibid., 56, 96, 61.
[92] For discussion of Stein's furniture, see Janet Hobhouse, *Everybody Who Was Anybody: A Biography of Gertrude Stein* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1975, 102-103. For discussion of dovetail joints in Renaissance-era furniture, see Daniel Diehl and Mark P. Donnelly, *Medieval & Renaissance Furniture: Plans & Instructions for Historical Reproductions* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2012), 188.

who she famously called a "village explainer"—owed to a visit he made to the Rue de Fleurus in the spring of 1921, when, gesticulating wildly in the midst of an harangue, Pound shattered one of Stein's carefully selected armchairs. In London years earlier he had done the same thing, leaning back in a "very beautiful cane and gilt chair" until it collapsed beneath him.[93] It may have been out of necessity, it seems, that Pound first developed his considerable skills as a craftsman.

But if grammar is a kind of agentless construction for Stein, a process that happens prior to and envelops the work of the writer, of what does the poet's labor consist? Where exactly does Stein's building take place? To answer those questions, we might first examine Stein's own conception of the poet's work. For Stein, the task of the writer is to "save the sentence" from premeditation, from the tendency of premeditated thought to ossify language or restrict it to well-worn channels. Like Pound, Stein is concerned to keep language vital, to maintain writing as an event simultaneous with thought and feeling. To "save the sentence," as Stein understands this work, is to preserve the immediacy of language against cliché, sentiment, fustian. *How to Write* offers instruction not necessarily in building with language, then, but in fostering a mode of attention in which language builds through the writer. Not unlike the poet Robert Duncan, discussed above, Stein argues that the writer's "obedience to intermittence" frees the "indwelling" that is the system of grammar.[94] *How to Write* thus offers instruction in a kind of investigation that takes place during—and is made possible by—the act of writing. "It is very hard to save the sentence," Stein admits. "Sentences are made wonderfully one at a time. Who makes them. Nobody can make them because nobody can what ever they do see."[95] In addition to the jointure of newlyweds and the houses they occupy, therefore, *How to Write* also meditates on the jointure of thought and feeling with language, and on

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[93] For the story of Pound's hapless relation to Stein's furniture, see Philippe Mikriammos, "Ezra Pound in Paris (1921-1924): A Cure of Youthfulness," *Paideuma: Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 14, no. 2/3 (Fall & Winter 1985), 385-386.
[94] Stein, *How to Write*, 71.
[95] Ibid., 30, 34.

the manifestation of this jointure in the poetic object—"all at once. / Dove and dove-tail," Stein writes. Or punning later: "in union there is strength."[96]

Stein's jointure of self and syntax—of interior processes with a prior system of grammar—eventuates in what Stein elsewhere calls the literary "master-piece," naming that object with which apprentices in pre-industrial guilds and workshops proved their mastery of craft practices. For Stein, master-pieces eschewed "forensic" premeditation in favor of the writer's joining herself at the very moment of composition with a broader linguistic matrix. "Now and then a master-piece can escape any one and get to be more and more there," Stein writes in *The Geographical History of America*, "and any one any one who can write as writing is written can make anything be there again and again."[97] Stein's own esoteric literary style, at its most challenging in a text like *How to Write*, prevents the reader from anticipating—or premeditating—how a sentence or bit of syntax will resolve itself. As she figures it, Stein's prose is a way of disrupting the relation between syntax and semantics, as if we were reading one word at a time through a magnifying glass. A "whole thing is not interesting because as a whole well as a whole there has to be remembering and forgetting," Stein asserts. "[B]ut one at a time, oh one at a time is something oh yes definitely something."[98]

Unlike Pound, Stein harbored few reservations about a contemporary culture of mass print, enamored as she was with detective fiction and skilled in manipulating the interstices of that culture for her own ends. Eager, for instance, to boost her profile among cosmopolitan taste-makers, Stein commissioned Mabel Dodge to publish and distribute a promotional pamphlet at the 1913 Armory Show in New York, a tactic which prompted Maria Jolas, among others, to accuse Stein of "Barnumesque publicity."[99] Stein shares with Pound, though, profound respect for language as a

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[96] Ibid., 174, 260.
[97] Stein, *The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (New York: Random House, 1936, 204.
[98] Ibid., 115.
[99] Hobhouse, *Everybody*, 165.

system transcending its local instantiation, figuring language as a form of construction into which we write ourselves, intermittently, moment by moment. If *How to Write* parodies the popular genre of the craft book, as scholars argue, its parody is far from simple tongue-in-cheek spoofing; rather, Stein indicts the genre for its perpetuation of premeditated literary structures and practices to be imitated by a mass audience. While still other scholars note the influence of mass manufacturing on Stein's writing, attention to her little-known craft book, *How to Write*, shows how Stein looked too to earlier forms of pre-industrial labor as a way to understand and articulate the process of poetic composition.[100] Stein describes that labor in a section of *How to Write* called "Arthur a Grammar," arguing that "a grammar makes it easy to change from a factory to a garden. / From working in a factory to working in a garden without distress."[101] It would be inappropriate to read a workerist politics into Stein's thinking-through-craft, but this moment does seem to gesture to the wider economic stakes involved in her implication of labor and language. Like other early twentieth-century poetry craft books, *How to Write* images a form of labor irreducible to regnant literary and material economies, images it briefly, fleetingly, tentatively—for Stein, it could never be otherwise.

"All was *well made*": The Poetry Craft Book Goes to School

A key step in the expropriation of craft epistemologies was the incorporation of the craft book itself into the American university, by mid-century the dominant institution in an evolving industrial-corporate economy. Though the university had been a major economic force since the Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862, a number of factors combined around mid-century to broaden its influence, among them an increase in government research contracts, the expansion of "strategic alliances" between academic departments and corporations, and a boom in corporate endowment of

[100] For representative treatment of the relation between Stein's literary style and the techniques of mass manufacturing, see Barrett Watten, *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), especially 118-125.
[101] Stein, *How to Write*, 88.

chairs, professorships, and institutes.[102] As sociologist Daniel Bell diagnosed, the university became the "axial structure" of the mid-century economy, that site where "theoretical knowledge [was] codified and enriched" and where an entrenched professional-managerial class methodically reproduced itself, to the point of becoming the fastest growing occupational category following World War II.[103] It was the reproduction of this class of knowledge workers which led the university to cultivate the abstract discourse of the professional as its *lingua franca*, prioritizing technical and theoretical forms of knowledge over the more concrete, even manual, epistemologies of the craftsman.[104] As Ethan Schrum summarizes, the university "craft[ed] a rhetoric centered on the knowledge economy to promote [its] importance for society."[105] Schrum's own rhetoric is instructive, for the university did not simply espouse professional-managerial values in unadulterated form—it rewrote them in the language of craft, invoking manual labor to metaphorize the very ethos, professionalism, which had outmoded manual labor in the first place. By the postwar era, the poetry craft book—like the writing workshop in which it was used—served as a key distribution point for those professional-managerial discourses on which a new "informational-corporate" economy would depend.

But this trajectory was not a foreordained conclusion. Indeed, the first poetry craft book to be employed widely in the creative writing workshop, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry*, re-tools the genre's long-running critique of commercialism into a critique of the university itself. Like New Critical ideology writ large, *Understanding Poetry* seeks to train students in

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[102] See Hans Radder, "The Commodification of Academic Research," in *The Commodification of Academic Research: Science and the Modern University*, ed. Hans Radder (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 7.

[103] Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 26. For further treatment of the role of the postwar university in facilitating the rise-to-power of the professional-managerial class see Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," 26-33 and Stephen Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[104] Peter Drucker, *Landmarks of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1959), 69.

[105] Ethan Schrum, *The Instrumental University: Education in the Service of the National Agenda After World War II* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 10.

forms of language use different from—and opposed to—those eventuating from an increasingly economistic society; to do so, the text intervenes at the very site where that society reproduces itself, challenging what Allen Tate called "the uncreative money-culture of modern times" and those "attitudes of the *haute bourgeoisie* that support it in the great universities."[106] Hardly the vehicle for a depoliticized aestheticism, as its critics charge, *Understanding Poetry* reads the organic structure of the poem as an enactment, in miniature, of the ironies, paradoxes, and contradictions papered over in the economism of contemporary society. To attend critically to these contradictions, Brooks and Warren believe, is to make visible the limitations of regnant cultural and economic institutions.[107] In levying such a critique, *Understanding Poetry* draws on a tradition of Southern Agrarianism long skeptical of capitalist relations and their effect on American culture, an antimodern tradition which looked not to pre-industrial craftsmanship—as the American Arts and Crafts movement did—but to small-scale agriculture as an alternative social form. Though agrarianism risked endorsing economic structures every bit as deleterious as those that prevailed under industrial- and informational-corporatism, it remained a potent—and, in the form of *Understanding Poetry*, a massively popular—antidote to professional-managerial values.

The merits and limitations of New Critical ideology have been well documented, but rarely acknowledged is how its objection to a rationalized American culture—scientistic, market-oriented, spiritually adrift—revolved around the invocation of labor and laborers. Like its middlebrow and modernist predecessors, *Understanding Poetry* explicitly extricates poetry from the literary and economic marketplace, though Brooks and Warren are especially concerned to distinguish the genre from professional-managerial labor. As early as the "Introduction" to the first edition of *Understanding Poetry*, published in 1938, they figure poetry as a distinct form of production, drawing

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[106] Allen Tate, "The Present Function of Criticism," in *Reason in Madness* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), 9.

[107] For a similar interpretation of New Critical cultural politics, see Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 216-217 and Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

up an imaginative scenario involving a hypothetical American worker, in subsequent editions referred to as "Mr. X." "We may do well," Brooks and Warren surmise, "to ask how much of the discourse of an average man in any given day is primarily concerned with information for the sake of information."

> After he has transacted his business, obeyed his road signs, ordered and eaten his dinner, and read the stock market reports, he might be surprised to reflect on the number of non-practical functions speech had fulfilled for him that day.[108]

In later editions, this thought experiment is expanded, to the point that by 1960 Mr. X will analyze "stock market quotations […] take inventory of the stock in [his] hardware store," and "follow the directions on a can of weed-killer," all while finding time to "punch the time clock at the factory or give an order to his broker." Brooks and Warren's heuristic is a suggestive articulation of New Critical values, locating poetry in a realm of "attitudes and feelings" removed from day-to-day labor and the kinds of language—"positivist," "practical," "utilitarian," all New Critical *bêtes noires*—associated with that labor. In *Understanding Poetry*, poetry resembles less the language of Mr. X's workaday experience than the non-informative language with which he "reminded his wife of some little episode of their early life" or "commented on the fine fall weather to the traffic officer."[109] As did Pound, Stein, and their middlebrow contemporaries, Brooks and Warren attempt to preserve distinctly poetic language by disaffiliating such language from wider literary and material economies.

Like Pound's *ABC*, of course, *Understanding Poetry* was intended first and foremost as instruction in "how to *read* a literary text," its case studies a kind of exegetical training in "saving the sentence," as Stein put it, from those forces that would reduce language to instrumentality.[110] Implicit in its hermeneutic framework, though, is the recognition that training in reading functions at the same time as training in writing, fostering as it does that critical discernment so integral to poetic

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[108] Brooks and Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, xxlii.
[109] Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1960), 5-6.
[110] Cleanth Brooks, "Forty Years of *Understanding Poetry*," in *Confronting Crisis: Teachers in America*, eds. Ernestine P. Sewell and Billi M. Rogers (Arlington: University of Texas at Arlington Press, 1979), 168. [emphasis mine]

composition. Moreover, much of the pedagogy in *Understanding Poetry* seems intended for would-be writers, in particular its definition of poetry through reference to metaphors of architecture and housing construction; it is difficult to read Brooks and Warren's discussion of authorial intentionality, for instance, as merely an interpretive aid—or, if it does serve as training in reading, it is training in reading *as a poet*. "It is true that sometimes the poet has a pretty clear idea of what he wants his poem to be," they write.

> But even in such circumstances, is the process of creation analogous to that of building a house by a blueprint? An architect intends a certain kind of house and he can predict it down to the last nail. The carpenter simply follows the blueprint. But at the best the poet cannot envisage the poem as the architect can envisage the house; and in so far as the poet can envisage the poem, he cannot transfer it into words in a mechanical fashion corresponding to the builder's work on the house.[111]

Though such a belabored metaphor may, in fact, have benefited from more careful blueprinting, the passage is clearly designed as a lesson in how poems come about, in cultivating the proper attitude toward and approach to literary production. In instructing readers in this mentality, *Understanding Poetry* even defines poetry through reference to athletics and physical culture. "Does a finely trained pole-vaulter in the act of making his leap think specifically of each of the different muscles he is employing?" Brooks and Warren ask. "[O]r does a boxer in the middle of a round think of the details of his boxing form?" Echoing middlebrow and modernist craft books, *Understanding Poetry* seems designed, then, as both a textbook for the literature classroom and a craft book for the creative writing workshop, the latter an increasingly prominent fixture within the mid-century university. In one of those workshops, a graduate student by the name of Flannery O'Connor understood the text as precisely such a craft book, even referring to *Understanding Poetry* as her "Bible"—high praise from such a famously devout Catholic.[112]

The plasticity of *Understanding Poetry*—its adaptability to a variety of academic settings—reflects

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[111] Brooks and Warren, *Understanding Poetry* (1950), 606.
[112] See McGurl, *The Program Era*, 133.

not only its authors' marketing savvy, but their familiarity with the material constraints under which literary pedagogues labored. At the time they began work on the text, Brooks and Warren were lowly assistant professors in the Department of English at Louisiana State University, tasked with teaching four classes per semester, editing *The Southern Review*, and equipping a culturally deprived student body with the skills of effective language use. Before it became a four-edition mass-market phenomenon, in other words, *Understanding Poetry* constituted an immediate—and profoundly utilitarian—response to the institutional context in which Brooks and Warren found themselves; indeed, the text began its life as a set of lecture notes copied off on Ditto machines and circulated among colleagues, a kind of mid-century academic *samizdat*. It is the entrenchment of this pedagogy—or its massification, in the postwar era, as the infinitely reproducible practices of "close reading"—which has led critics to find in the New Criticism the very professional-managerial ethos to which Brooks, Warren, and their associates objected. As Gerald Graff argues, "as the university increased in size, the need arose for a simplified pedagogy, encouraging the detachment of 'close reading' from the cultural purposes that originally inspired it." Brooks and Warren's "insistence on the disinterested nature of poetic experience," Graff goes on, "was an implicit rejection of a utilitarian culture and thus a powerfully 'utilitarian' and 'interested' gesture."[113] Edward Brunner locates this professional-managerial ethos within the "well-wrought" poem itself, contending that the New Criticism "succeeded in professionalizing that reading site by claiming a distinct set of interpretive procedures that would do justice to the literary text."[114] There is certainly merit in such charges—John Crowe Ransom, after all, called for literary study to be "seriously taken in hand by professionals," what he termed a "Criticism, Inc."[115]

The dual face of the New Criticism, though—and of *Understanding Poetry* in particular—testifies to

[113] Graff, *Professing Literature*, 145, 149.
[114] Edward Brunner, *Cold War Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 6.
[115] John Crowe Ransom, "Criticism, Inc.," in *Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism*, ed. Garrick Davis (Athens: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 2008), 50.

the position of the text as a "switching point" within the genre of the poetry craft book. Specifically, *Understanding Poetry* marks the culmination of a line of thinking, conspicuous in middlebrow and modernist examples of the genre, which opposes poetry to the professional-managerial values of evolving industrial-corporate and informational-corporate economies. If New Critics challenged those values at the site where they were most systematically reproduced, the university, postwar and contemporary poetry craft books almost universally align themselves with that very institution; poet Annie Finch recommends her own craft book, for example, for use in the "intermediate or advanced poetry-writing workshop, either undergraduate or graduate; a beginning undergraduate poetry workshop or a workshop with a focus predominately on free verse."[116] Not unrelatedly, postwar poetry craft books depart from Brooks and Warren by figuring poetry as manual labor, rewriting the university's promotion of professional-managerial values in the language of pre-industrial craft. At this switching point in literary history, that is, as the craft book—and literary production in general—take up shop within the American university, the manual laborer returns as mascot for the creative writing "workshop," returns as trope and tag-line, as that image so integral, for so long, to American social and political discourse.

One of the most remarkable examples of this figuration, Roy Peter Clark's 2006 *Writing Tools*, demonstrates the importance of craft rhetoric as a buttress for institutional authority. "The National Commission on Writing has described the disastrous consequences of bad writing in America," Clark explains, "for businesses, professions, educators, consumers, and citizens."

> Poorly written reports, memos, announcements, and messages cost us time and money. […] The Commission calls for a 'revolution' in the way Americans think about writing. The time is right. […] We need lots of writing tools to build a nation of writers. Here are fifty of them, one for every week of the year. You get two weeks for vacation.[117]

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[116] Annie Finch, *A Poet's Craft: A Comprehensive Guide to Making and Sharing Your Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), viii.

[117] Roy Peter Clark, *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), 8.

Though Clark's is a concise articulation of the role that craft plays in the postwar university, figurations of poetry as manual labor cut across the postwar and contemporary eras, from Iowa Writers' Workshop director Paul Engle's 1964 statement that "a work of art is work" to poet Mary Kinzie's 2013 description of an "apprenticeship" in which, after "mastering [poetry's] rudiments," students begin the "real work of hearing and making rhythm."[118] Indeed, some of the most influential craft books of the MFA era invoke housing construction, in particular, as an analogy for the poetic process. In her legendary *A Poetry Handbook*, first published in 1994, Mary Oliver contends that "just as a bricklayer or any worker—even a brain surgeon—improves with study and experience, surely poets become more proficient with study and 'practice.'"[119] In their 1997 *The Poet's Companion*, Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux describe poetic making as a "line by line, brick by brick construction," comparing the poet's mastery of detail to the fastidious construction of European architecture. "In the great cathedrals, bridges, and railway stations of our world each block was 'cut smooth and well fitting,'" Addonizio and Laux write, quoting Pound's "*usura* Canto," itself a powerful argument for poetic and economic craftsmanship.[120] More than ancillary metaphors, such figurations embody core principles within postwar and contemporary writers' otherwise unique poetic ideologies. In his 2004 craft book *Poetry: The Basics*, Jeffrey Wainwright suggests connecting end rhymes with a series of lines running down the right margin of the poem, a way for aspiring writers to visualize and imitate poetic structures. "Drawing these arcs and then turning the page through ninety degrees," Wainwright explains, "the rhyming of some elaborate stanza forms […] can be seen to have a nearly architectural structure."[121] In the same way, John Hollander's *Rhyme's Reason* characteristically links form and content: "in couplets, one line often

[118] Paul Engle, "The Writer on Writing," in *On Creative Writing*, ed. Paul Engle (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1964), 12. Mary Kinzie, *A Poet's Guide to Poetry* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 214.
[119] Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1994), 28.
[120] Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux, *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 104, 186.
[121] Jeffrey Wainwright, *Poetry: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 24.

makes a point / Which hinges on its bending, like a joint."[122]

Though postwar poetry craft books depart dramatically from earlier texts, like *Understanding Poetry*, in which poetic production was carefully *disaffiliated* with labor, in other ways they display a high level of consistency with such texts. Like their predecessors, postwar craft books are organized by discrete craft techniques such as line, diction, sound, structure, and image, often with little theoretical or historical framing. Like their predecessors, postwar poetry craft books recommend that writers internalize rather than consciously process these techniques, resorting in many cases to the same metaphors of athletics and physical culture used by earlier authors. "Aspiring golfers swing and miss if they try to remember the thirty or so different elements of an effective golf swing," Clark cautions.[123] Addonizio and Laux note that effective tennis players "aren't thinking 'racket back, step forward, swing, follow through' as [they] rally."[124] Also like their predecessors, postwar poetry craft books mobilize a remarkably consistent set of pedagogical tropes and topoi, reminding writers of the pregnant etymologies of "verse,"[125] "sonnet,"[126] and "stanza,"[127] for example, distinguishing between Latinate and Anglo-Saxon diction,[128] and recommending the iamb as that meter which "best suggests the structures of informal speech."[129]

Given these similarities with middlebrow and modernist craft books, why do postwar and contemporary texts so radically revise the relationship between poetry and labor? Why does poetry, we might say, suddenly become so laborious? The most commonly invoked answer to this question is that it is creative writing craft alone—as opposed to something like inspiration or creativity—

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122 John Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 11.
123 Clark, *Writing Tools*, 6.
124 Addonizio and Laux, *The Poet's Companion*, 183.
125 See Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*, 35 and Robert Pinsky, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 25.
126 See Robert Beum and Karl Shapiro, *The Prosody Handbook: A Guide to Poetic Form* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006), 136.
127 See Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason*, 18-19.
128 See Clark, *Writing Tools*, 61 and John Redmond, *How to Write a Poem* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 92.
129 Beum and Shapiro, *The Prosody Handbook*, 34-35. See also Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason*, 10.

which can be taught in an institutional setting. As Mark McGurl argues, craft allows literary pedagogues "to separate the question of talent and originality, which cannot be taught, from the question of technique, which can."[130] While cultivating the *consciousness* of a poet may be an unattainable objective, understanding the relation between vehicle and tenor—or the redirections of poetic movement or the combinative possibilities of alliteration and assonance—is a technique far more easily mastered in the fifteen-week workshop. Tim Mayers reasons similarly in *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and The Future of English Studies*. "Because so many people clung to the notion that writers are born, not made," Mayers explains, "craft became virtually synonymous with the one small aspect of creative composition—technique—that these writers believed could be taught."[131] And though he does not discuss creative writing specifically, Richard Sennett likewise suggests the pedagogical importance of craft techniques, arguing that "there is no art without craft; the idea for a painting is not a painting."[132] This line of thinking may be eminently practical, but it too readily ignores the broader ideological motivations behind the mobilization of craft rhetoric; a major contention of this project is that craft constitutes not some lowest common denominator in writing pedagogy, but an instrumental—and consciously cultivated—strategy in the university's promotion of its own knowledge work.

A more convincing answer to the question of why poetry craft books, in the postwar era, consistently link poetic to architectural construction involves the institutional position of creative writing within departments of English. While it is the discipline's encouragement of self-expression that separates creative writing from departmental neighbors composition and literature, it is the invocation of architecture—and manual labor generally—that frames poetry as equal in rigor to the classification of rhetorical topoi or the materialist exegesis of *Ulysses*. In the words of Edward

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130 McGurl, *The Program Era*, 93.

131 Tim Mayers, *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and The Future of English Studies* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 67.

132 Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 65.

Brunner, craft flaunts the poem as a "labor-intensive" object, an "exquisitely balanced verbal machine crafted by specialists in the language arts."[133] Craft pedagogies convey academic rigor, that is, in the same way that, for Thorstein Veblen, Gothic architecture bestows an aura of respectability and permanence on the American university. A "fictitious winding stair," the "defensive details of a medieval keep"—such architecture "strikes the lay attention directly and convincingly," Veblen argues, "while the pursuit of learning is a relatively obscure matter […] even with the help of the newspapers and the circular literature that issues from the university's publicity bureau."[134] The argument that craft pedagogies stake out disciplinary space for creative writing entails rethinking Howard Singerman's influential claim that university arts programs train students not in "manual" but in "theoretical" and "historical" skillsets. As Singerman contends, "to be included among the disciplines, art must give up its definition as craft or technique, a fully trainable manual skill on the guild or apprenticeship model."[135] Singerman's argument may hold for visual arts programs, but in extending his claims to creative writing he ignores the rhetorical thrust of craft pedagogies, the ways in which the "apprenticeship model" is strategically deployed within the wider context of a "rigorous"—which is to say "professional"—academic department.

A related ideological motivation, then, for the figuration of poetry as manual labor is that it contributes to a discourse of professionalism which continuously reinforces the authority of the university—craft workshops do not so much produce poets as they produce professionals. Just as craft pedagogies legitimate creative writing as a discipline, craft at the same time provides would-be writers with the credentials necessary to distinguish themselves from county laureate poets and weekend workshoppers. In an era of escalated credentialing and contracting arts economies, craft

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133 Brunner, *Cold War Poetry*, 6.

134 See Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 132-135.

135 Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 6.

constitutes one line of force, therefore, in what Pierre Bourdieu has called a struggle "to impose the dominant definition of the writer," effectively delimiting the population of writers licensed to take part in that struggle.[136] Whereas craft pedagogies begin, for someone like George Pierce Baker, as a way of disrupting the cultural and material reproduction of the ruling class, they function in the postwar era—with their incorporation into the informational-corporate university—to reinscribe the same utilitarian values that Baker opposed. The creative writing workshop, we might say, transforms at midnight into a licensing agency. In a not unprecedented rhetorical sleight-of-hand, the university conceals its investment in professional-managerial economies with the language of manual labor; such appeals to workerist language have long been standard within right-wing politics, but there is dark irony in the fact that, as the university promotes the redistribution of economic resources toward professional-managerial workers, craft books look mockingly back at residual forms of labor. Postwar writers themselves evince profound regret for the evanescence of manual labor, juxtaposing informational-corporate culture with a lapsed era of craftsmanship. "We sigh—or I do—for the days when whole cultures were infused with noble simplicity," Denise Levertov writes in her own craft essay. "[W]hen though there were cruelty and grief, there was no ugliness; when King Alcinoüs himself stowed the bronze pots for Odysseus under the rowers' benches; when from shepherd's pipe and warrior's sandal to palace door and bard's song, all was *well made*."[137]

Curiously, however, just as craft vanishes as ethos and economic practice it reappears in appropriated form, not only in the guise of the poetry craft book but also in a wider contemporary fascination with craft rhetoric. In the introduction to this project, I discuss how intellectuals such as C. Wright Mills and William Whyte invoke craft as a metaphor for the kind of "knowledge work" involved in sociology and business administration, respectively. Advocating craftsmanship as an

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[136] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 42.
[137] Denise Levertov, "A Note on the Work of the Imagination," in *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 205. [emphasis in original]

idealized model of the sociologist's labor, Mills writes that "there is an inner relation between the craftsman and the thing he makes, from the image he first forms of it through its completion, which [...] makes the craftsman's will-to-work spontaneous and even exuberant." Though Mills laments that "none of these aspects are now relevant to modern work experience," he nonetheless urges a rebirth of something like the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal, balancing the sociologist's expressive labor with technical "perfection of his craft."[138] In his 1956 classic *The Organization Man*, likewise, Whyte argues that the task of the properly administered corporation is to "*re-create* the belongingness of the Middle Ages," looking back wistfully on a guild-like sense of corporate purpose.[139] Yet craft also reappears, around mid-century, in the form of luxury consumer products requiring, for their enjoyment, both economic and cultural capital. In 1949, the *New York Times* declared "hand-loomed" textiles the "newest look in upholstery fabrics," championing "men and women who create with their hands rather than a pencil."[140] Consumers could—as many did—buy placemats designed by Anni Albers and marketed at departments stores such as Macy's and Bloomingdale's. Today, the workshop poem shares discursive space with "craft" IPAs and "hand-loomed" Pottery Barn rugs, with "artisanal" donut boutiques and "indie" video games, "retro" cassette-tapes and Yeti coolers—as Bourdieu makes clear, there is no area in which the "stylization of life" might not assert its pressure. Packaged into a haute lifestyle proposition characterized, Bourdieu argues, by the "barbarous reintegration of aesthetic consumption into the world of ordinary consumption," couture craft signals cultural distinction just as the production of a creative writing thesis does.[141] As one group of couture experts describe, craft companies "constantly pursue

[138] Mills, *White Collar*, 220, 224, 196.

[139] William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), 36-37. [emphasis in original]

[140] Quoted in Jennifer Scanlan, "Handmade Modernism: Craft in Industry in the Postwar Period," in *Crafting Modernism: Midcentury American Art and Design*, ed. Jeannine Falino (New York: Museum of Arts and Design, 2012), 102.

[141] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 5, 6. For further discussion of couture craft in the late twentieth century, see Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 35-60.

the right balance between the artistic (creative) soul and the rational (managerial) soul," a description which suggests nothing so much as the MFA workshop.[142]

To examine the role of the poetry craft book within that workshop is to confront an exhibit in what Georg Lukács called "the capitalization of the spirit," as the rationalization of American culture extends even into the "crafting" of the poetic object.[143] So affianced does the poetry craft book become to the broader authority of the university that its erstwhile investment in poetry as a spiritual discipline resurfaces as New Age spiritualism, a kind of haute or couture religiosity. Inviting would-be writers to court their own personal muse, Annie Finch recommends filling one's writing space with talismanic figurines organized around a poetry altar. "My own writing studio is full of figurines or reminders of inspiring Muses of various cultures," Finch describes, "from Pegasus to the Celtic poetry goddess Brigid to Sarasvati, Hindu goddess of poetry and music." Finch goes on to suggest that writers mitigate the anxiety of submitting their work—she calls it "offering" one's work—by turning the occasion into a festive spiritual séance, "burning incense or candles and playing music."[144] Redolent of the New Age cult, such insipid pedagogies belie the quite rationalized function of contemporary creative writing craft. It is no accident, after all, that the discipline of creative writing exploded at precisely the historical moment at which the university itself, site of a newly re-politicized "workshop," consolidated its influence over an ever more "capitalized" American economy—such workshops served efficiently in their dual function of promoting professional-managerial values while concealing those values in craft lexicons.

The critique, then, that the MFA industry privileges what poet Lisa Jarnot calls an ethos of "career over craft"—or what elsewhere passes as "professional development"—misses how creative writing craft itself has been deployed as a finishing tool for aspiring professionals. "MFA programs

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142 Cesare Amatulli, Matteo De Angelis, Michele Costabile, and Gianluigi Guido, *Sustainable Luxury Brands: Evidence from Research and Implications for Managers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 10-11.
143 Quoted in Mills, *White Collar*, 156.
144 Finch, *A Poet's Craft*, 15, 608.

highlight the idea that poetry is a commodity that will allow the poet an academic position, high-visibility magazine publications, a book contract, and the skills to negotiate through a social world of academic conferences and publishing house circles," Jarnot diagnoses. "These are all antithetical to the craft of poetry."[145] Though not inaccurate, such ready ethical distinctions ignore the implication of craft within a broader informational-corporate economy. The end of craft pedagogies is hardly the well-wrought poem; it is the perpetuation of a system of licensure that underwrites the poet's—and the university's—cultural capital.

In what follows, I examine how that capital courses through and becomes transformed within the writing of Richard Hugo, a poet whose life and work—both inside and outside of the academy—offer striking insight into the practice of craft in the postwar university.

III. Richard Hugo and Postwar Creative Writing

"Invest the feeling in the words": *The Triggering Town*

If craft books like Finch's seem blithely oblivious to the wider stakes of the rhetoric they peddle, Richard Hugo's 1979 craft book, *The Triggering Town*, unabashedly identifies craft pedagogies as integral to the university's economic authority. "Creative writing belongs in the university for the same reason other subjects do," Hugo makes clear. "[B]ecause people will pay to study them. If you challenge the right of creative writing to be in the university, to be fair you'd have to challenge a long list of other subjects. […] (Not a bad idea, but let's not wreck the economy beyond repair.)"[146]

Hugo understood that economy well. In his formative years he labored at odd jobs in the warehouses, steel mills, and ammunition magazines of West Seattle, and, after earning his degree in

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145 Lisa Jarnot, "Why I Hate MFA Programs, or an Argument to Prove That the Abolishing of the MFA Program in American Universities May, as Things Now Stand, Be Attended with Very Few Inconveniences," in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, ed. Joshua Marie Wilkinson (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 181.

146 Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 54.

English from the University of Washington, worked for twelve years as a technical writer for Boeing. It was at Washington in the fall of 1947—on G.I. Bill benefits earned for his service as a bomber in World War II—that Hugo studied in the first poetry workshops taught by Theodore Roethke, then on the verge of breakthrough success with his widely acclaimed second collection, *The Lost Son and Other Poems*. Roethke himself was a master poetic craftsman, requiring of his students—among whom were Carolyn Kizer, William Stafford, David Wagoner, and James Wright—meticulous craft exercises in forms modeled after Wyatt, Herrick, Hopkins, and Auden, among others.[147] After over a decade at Boeing, Hugo became an assistant professor at the University of Montana in 1965, succeeding in the early 1970s to the directorship of creative writing there, a position he held until his death in 1982.

Hugo, this is to say, is the workshop poet *par excellence*, an upwardly mobile working-class writer from White Center, Washington—"a world outside the mainstream," Hugo wrote, "isolated and ignored"—who marshaled his veteran benefits toward entrée into the postwar professional-managerial class, thereafter disseminating the language of that class to two decades of aspiring writers.[148] Hugo mythologizes this social trajectory in his posthumously published autobiography, in which the imposing architecture of neighboring West Seattle prefigures the university into which he would matriculate. There "sat the castle, the hill," Hugo writes, "West Seattle where we would go to high school."

> The streets were paved, the homes elegant […] Gentility and confidence reigned on that hill. West Seattle was not a district. It was an ideal. […] [I]t towered over the sources of felt debasement, the filthy, loud belching steel mill, the oily slow river, the immigrants hanging on to their odd ways.[149]

Despite his sense that his working-class upbringing constituted a source of "debasement," Hugo

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147 For these and other details of Hugo's biography, see Michael S. Allen, *We Are Called Human: The Poetry of Richard Hugo* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1982), 3.
148 Richard Hugo, *The Real West Marginal Way: A Poet's Autobiography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), 14.
149 Ibid., 8.

would return to that source throughout his career as a poet, incorporating both labor and laborers into an oeuvre centered obsessively on the devastation of working-class communities—the material deterioration, the loss of collective identity, the social and psychological despair. Across the majority of this work, Hugo develops a "Deep Image" poetics characterized by associative imagism and the cultivation of subconscious spiritual and natural values. Whereas iconic Deep Imagists like Robert Bly and W. S. Merwin favor thick description over more discursive language, however, Hugo's work possesses a winking postmodern reflexivity. "Try this for obscene development," Hugo writes in his 1977 collection *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*. "[T]hey made me / director of creative writing. Better I'd gone on bleeding / getting whiter and whiter and finally blending / into the snow to be found next spring."[150] Refiguring the whiteness of the page as self-annulling oblivion—an oblivion with racialized overtones, as I demonstrate in the coda to this project—Hugo's poetics understands itself *a priori* as a product of postwar institutionality.

The Triggering Town, accordingly, offers a rich diagnostic of the institutional habitus of creative writing. One of the most widely used craft books of all time, the text shares with postwar and contemporary craft books a number of tropes, with Hugo recommending that students write in a "hard-covered notebook with green-lined pages" and advocating internalization of craft techniques through reference to—what else?—the techniques of golf. "Once a spectator said, after Jack Nicklaus had chipped a shot in from the sand trap, 'That's pretty lucky,'" Hugo writes. "Nicklaus is supposed to have replied, 'Right. But I notice the more I practice, the luckier I get.'"[151] Drawing from Hugo's experience teaching at Montana, *The Triggering Town* is a collection of essays treating subjects ranging from the economic considerations of writing—"How Poets Make a Living," Hugo titles one essay—to pedagogical strategies and craft techniques, foremost among which is what

[150] Richard Hugo, *Making Certain It Goes On: The Collected Poems of Richard Hugo* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 297.
[151] Hugo, *The Triggering Town*, 37, 17.

Hugo calls "triggering" and "generated" subjects. While the poem begins, for Hugo, with a triggering subject that "starts" or "causes" its action, it quickly elevates out of itself to arrive at a generated subject, that idea or feeling "which the poem comes to say or mean" and which is "discovered in the poem during the writing."[152] Though the two writers could hardly be more distinct stylistically, Hugo and Stein share a conception of poetry as a mode of investigation that takes place during and through the act of writing.

For Hugo, the quintessential "triggering" subject is the de-industrialized mill town, that titular "triggering town" glimpsed momentarily as the writer passes through. "It should make impression enough that I can see things in the town [...] long after I've left," Hugo writes, but the encounter, he insists, should be momentary, evocative. The writer must remain unburdened by historical fact and retain, thereby, the imaginative freedom to adapt the "triggering town" to poetic imperative. "Knowing can be a limiting thing," Hugo writes. "Guessing leaves you more options."[153] Moreover, as de-industrialized towns recur throughout *The Triggering Town*, the poet's freedom comes increasingly to resemble an economic relationship. "You owe the details nothing," Hugo advises. "If you have no emotional investment in the town, though you have taken immediate emotional possession of it for the duration of the poem, it may be easier to invest the feeling in the words."[154] The statement, like the poetics to which it gestures, is a fascinating one, ethically complex read in the context of postwar creative writing. On one hand, Hugo asks aspiring poets to reinvest in—to witness and give voice to—those towns left behind in the consolidation of a mid-century informational-corporate economy. On the other hand, Hugo's financial rhetoric frames the writer as a kind of expropriative collections agent, neatly allegorizing the university's promotion of professional-managerial labor—that is, Hugo recommends "mining" a town for its aesthetic value

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[152] Ibid., 4.
[153] Ibid., 5-6.
[154] Ibid., 13.

and redistributing that value among knowledge workers who can make most profitable use of it. Hugo would hardly be unwitting as to economic implications of his metaphor. In an essay in *The Triggering Town* titled "In Defense of Creative Writing Classes," he unflinchingly locates creative writing in the context of the research-driven university. "Today," he writes, "the department budget in most state universities is based on enrollment statistics," noting the importance of creative writing to departments otherwise beleaguered by hiring freezes, financial rollbacks, and departmental consolidation. "The professional administrator is everywhere," Hugo perceives, "and English departments are not above using statistics swelled by people […] for whom knowing is less fun at times than guessing."[155]

Of course, the poverty-stricken mill town does not appear *ex nihilo* on the scene of American literature. From Sherwood Anderson's "Winesburg" to Edgar Lee Master's "Spoon River," triggering towns have long supplied a rich vein from which American writers have drawn their material. Such towns pop up everywhere in Hugo's writing, to the extent that his tables of contents read like a travelogue—"Graves at Mukilteo," "Mendocino, Like You Said," "The Milltown Union Bar," "Helena, Where Homes Go Mad," "Missoula Softball Tournament," "Why I Think of Dumar Sadly." Perhaps the most iconic of Hugo's triggering towns is Philipsburg, Montana, a former mining and timber town located an hour southeast of Missoula. Memorialized in Hugo's widely-popular "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg," the town had a population of 820 in the 2010 census and serves as the administrative seat of Granite County, home to more than two dozen "ghost towns" abandoned when local economies collapsed. Though I do not treat the poem at length, I want briefly to suggest how it embodies Hugo's "triggering town" poetics, as well as how Hugo meditates therein on the practice of creative writing within the postwar university. For behind the poem's Deep Image description is a reflexive—and, as its title suggests, ethically nuanced—assessment of

[155] Ibid., 59, 54.

those literary and material economies from which poetry, in the postwar era especially, remains inextricable. In attending to "Degrees of Gray," therefore—as to Hugo's work generally—I reveal how poetic production has migrated discursively in relation to evolving industrial- and informational-corporate regimes; poetry may be work, as postwar craft books figure it, but Hugo shows how this work can adopt without acceding to those terms set for it by a professional-managerial society.

In "Degrees of Gray," Philipsburg's bankrupt mining and timber industries stand in for the speaker's psychic condition, and much of the first half of the poem consists of description of a town that clearly functions as objective correlative. "The principal supporting business now / is rage," Hugo writes. "Hatred of the various grays / the mountain sends, hatred of the mill, / The Silver Bill repeal, the best liked girls / who leave each year for Butte."[156] One gets a sense in these lines of the highly polished nature of Hugo's craftsmanship; it is a lapidary passage in iambic pentameter, its sliding "il" sounds punctured with plosives that suggest incipient violence. That violence comes not as physical confrontation, however, but as psychic transformation—"Isn't this your life?" Hugo asks in the third stanza, making explicit the link between exterior and interior geographies. It is a striking moment of anagnorisis, the second-person pronoun retaining a kind of psychic distance while also forcing the moment to its crisis. If Hugo's speaker mines the town for what it reveals about his life, Hugo the poet mines the town for its metaphorical potential. Hugo thereby solicits the reader into what becomes a collaborative process of emotional evaluation. An equally abrupt turn, moreover, occurs at the beginning of the fourth and final stanza, not a rhetorical question but an imperative command. "Say no to yourself," Hugo pleads, rejecting an equivalence between town and interior condition and, in so doing, undoing the poetic craftsmanship with which the two had been linked. Here in its entirety is the poem's final stanza:

[156] This and all subsequent quotations of the poem come from Hugo, *Making Certain*, 216-217.

> Say no to yourself. The old man, twenty
> when the jail was built, still laughs
> although his lips collapse. Someday soon,
> he says, I'll go to sleep and not wake up.
> You tell him no. You're talking to yourself.
> The car that brought you here still runs.
> The money you buy lunch with,
> no matter where it's mined, is silver
> and the girl who serves your food
> is slender and her red hair lights the wall.

The ending of the poem certainly possesses a redemptive thrust, its short sentences evoking resilience in the face of economic and emotional collapse, its closing image—literally luminous—suggesting both sexual redemption and artistic grace. Yet Hugo's ending also models the economic complexity of his work at large, as well as the wider institutional context in which it exists. While his poetic attention to detail underwrites the speaker's newfound optimism, Hugo's deployment of that attention points to the expropriative practices so integral to his poetics. Hugo, that is, wrenches beauty from a context otherwise shot-through by economic scarcity, his own poetic redemption predicated on the labor of an objectified—yet strangely abstracted—server "wall[ed]" in within a tourist economy.

One might convict Hugo, therefore, of something like "disaster tourism," "ruin pornography," or of extracting poetic "surplus value" from manual labor. More important, however, is that Hugo *shows us* these procedures, disclosing and trusting his readers to understand the complex position of creative writing within the postwar university. If Hugo glibly justifies creative writing in economic terms, as he does in *The Triggering Town*, he also aligns poetry against those forces that would subsume the individual in technocracy. In the same way that the server's luminous red hair suggests, at least from one angle, the redemptive potential of poetic craft, Hugo defends the purpose and objectives of those workshops in which such craft is honed. "What about the student who is not good?" Hugo asks. "Who will never write much?"

> It is possible for a good teacher to get from that student one poem or one story that far exceeds whatever hopes the student had. It may be of no importance to the world of high culture, but it may be very important to the student. It is a small thing, but it is also small and wrong to forget or ignore lives that can use a single microscopic moment of personal triumph.

For Hugo, the small-scale creative writing workshop constitutes "one of the last places you can go where your life still matters," an alternative to the rationalized regimes that structure postwar experience.[157]

Hugo's ambivalence with respect to the institutional habitus of creative writing—whether to embrace incorporation or struggle to retain autonomy—runs like an undercurrent throughout his poetry, perhaps nowhere more pointedly than in his 1977 collection *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*, written contemporaneously with *The Triggering Town*. As should by now be a familiar refrain, Hugo's thinking-through of that ambivalence takes the form of a meditation on labor of various kinds, on work and workers and on the places—bars, mills, towns, trailers, workshops, classrooms—within and on behalf of which they labor.

31 Letters and 13 Dreams

In the winter of 1970-71, while serving as visiting writer at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Hugo suffered a breakdown that forced him to resign his post and retreat, with some degree of public shame, to psychiatric treatment in Seattle. Hugo had been living in a trailer park at the time and drinking heavily, and, while the details of what he called his "crack-up" are inconsistent, his collapse seems also to have involved charged sexual encounters with several women and personal flare-ups with colleagues.[158]

The epistolary *31 Letters and 13 Dreams* opens in the aftermath of this collapse, as Hugo skulks back to Seattle and eventually to the Department of English at Montana. All of this is established in

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[157] Hugo, *The Triggering Town*, 64, 65.
[158] See Allen, *We Are Called Human*, 113-114.

the opening "Letter to Kizer from Seattle," in which Hugo confesses to fellow Roethke student Carolyn Kizer that "I suddenly went ape / in the Iowa tulips." And Hugo goes on: "Ten successive days I alienated women / I liked best. I told a coed why her poems were bad / (they weren't) and didn't understand a word I said."[159] Given the traumatic context and subject matter of the collection, it is unsurprising that the book possesses an emotional intensity and serious sense of introspection sometimes lacking in Hugo's earlier work. In *31 Letters*, Hugo moves from a Deep Image mode influenced by Roethke—trout, wastewater spillways, mill towns—to a mature Confessionalist mode which, in the wake of Lowell's 1959 *Life Studies*, would come to dominate mid-century workshop poetry. Gone are Hugo's idiosyncratic turns of phrase and objective correlatives drawn from mining and timber towns. In their place, Hugo cultivates a more discursive, statement-driven voice housed in a looser line that tends toward the colloquial. The tone in *31 Letters* is the tone of recovery. Hugo is clear-eyed but wounded, tentative, as if gingerly wandering out into the world for the first time. This formal shift, I argue, pries apart two aspects of what I have called an American Arts and Crafts "craft ideal"—engaged, expressive labor and fastidious adherence to technical standards. For in *31 Letters*, Hugo not only jettisons his previous Deep Image mode, but a consciously crafted style—lapidary, polished, controlled—in order to develop a more expressive, emotion-driven poetics. Hugo's ambivalence about the institutional habitus of creative writing, this is to say, registers in a formal shift that finds him rejecting, if tentatively, both workshop craft and the larger institution that houses it.

As Hugo retreats from Iowa, the titular "letter" poems of *31 Letters and 13 Dreams* serve to reestablish the personal and professional networks essential to Hugo's literal and literary health. Like the highways, rivers, and rail lines that run through his earlier work, these "letters"—all but one of them written to poets—reconnect Hugo to a world outside his own turmoil, integrating him with

[159] Hugo, *Making Certain*, 275.

a support system represented in writers like Kizer, Marvin Bell, A. R. Ammons, Robert Bly, and even the young Albert Goldbarth, at the time Hugo's student at Iowa. Relatedly, the places from which Hugo writes are often cities and university towns to which Hugo has been invited to read, the book mapping his reincorporation into professional circuits of academic achievement. As much as *31 Letters* functions as a narrative of personal redemption, it is also an Algeresque class narrative, one that culminates in Hugo being named "director / of Creative Writing" at Montana.[160] Yet Hugo's is no straightforward trajectory toward the ivory heights of Missoula. For every "31 letters" forward, the collection offers "13 dreams" in which, as the inverted number suggests, Hugo's traumatic past resurfaces. Written in a second-person perspective that functions, I've argued, to maintain an insulating psychic distance, the collection's dream poems exhibit the return of repressed anxieties, from the drinking, insecurity, and misogynistic violence that loomed so threateningly at Iowa to older anxieties revolving around Hugo's experience in World War II and his childhood fear of authority figures. Moreover, Hugo's quasi-mythological ascent from the depths of his Iowa City trailer is accompanied, as in *The Triggering Town*, by profound ambivalence about his reincorporation into the professional culture of the university.

In *31 Letters*, that ambivalence registers in part in the speaker's relation to work, workers, and the places they occupy. "What a relief that was from school," Hugo says of the Milltown Union Bar in "Letter to [William] Logan from Milltown," "from that smelly / student-teacher crap and those dreary committees / where people actually say 'considering the lateness / of the hour.'"[161] Such ambivalence instantiates aesthetically C. Wright Mills's classic postwar account of "cross-pressured" professional-managerial laborers. "Internally, they are split, fragmented," Mills writes, "externally,

[160] Ibid., 304.
[161] Ibid., 297.

they are dependent on larger forces."[162] Time and again, *31 Letters* details Hugo's felt disconnect from—and nostalgia for—a vanished past associated with small-town manual laborers. In "Letter to Reed from Lolo," Hugo laments that "The Dixon Bar is off personal limits / since they misread our *New Yorker* poems and found them / derogating, not the acts of love we meant."[163] In "Letter to Levertov from Butte," Hugo goes further: "On one hand, no matter what my salary is / or title, I remain a common laborer," he writes, "stained by the perpetual / dust from loading flour or coal. I stay humble, inadequate / inside." On the other hand, he goes on, "I know the cruelty of poverty," and "I don't want / to be part of it. I want to be what I am, a writer good enough / to teach with you and Gold and Singer, even if only in / some conference leader's imagination." That poem concludes with a striking passage instructive in assessing Hugo's "triggering town" poetics, a passage which suggests that, whatever its faults, the poetic mining of de-industrialized mill towns served deep psychic needs:

> And I want my life
> inside to go on long as I do, though I only populate bare
> landscape with surrogate suffering, with lame men
> crippled by more disease, and create finally
> a simple grief I can deal with, a pain the indigent can find
> acceptable. I do go on.[164]

Poetic craftsmanship may arrogate economic and cultural authority to the postwar university, but it also allows a poet like Hugo to objectify interior trauma in the form of the well-wrought aesthetic object. Just as Hugo's personal health depends in *31 Letters* on his reintegration into professional networks, so too does his flourishing depend on his ability to master the professional discourse of creative writing craft. As Hugo puts it, "we create our prison and we earn parole each poem."[165]

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162 Mills, *White Collar*, ix. For a more recent account of professional-managerial laborers being "cross-pressured" in their relation to their employers, see John McAdams, *The New Class in Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
163 Hugo, *Making Certain*, 288.
164 Ibid., 308.
165 Ibid., 313.

Accordingly, much of *31 Letters* lavishes attention on various forms of craftsmanship, acts of care in making that testify, for Hugo, to an overcoming of interior trauma and exterior chaos. "Great to see your long-coming, well-crafted book / getting good reviews," Hugo writes to John Haislip, director of creative writing at the University of Oregon. In "Letter to Mantsch from Havre"—the only poem addressed to a non-writer—Hugo similarly recalls his admiration for his teammate in Missoula's recreational softball league:

> So few of us are good at what we do, and what we do,
> well done or not, seems futile. I'm trying to find Monty
> Holden's barber shop. I want to tell him style in anything,
> pitching, hitting, cutting hair, is worth our trying even
> if we fail. And when that style, the graceful compact swing
> leaves the home crowd hearing its blood and the ball roars off
> in night like determined moon, it is our pleasure
> to care about something well done.

As in many of his poems, Hugo makes explicit the associative leap to poetry. "The ball jumps / from your bat over and over. I want my poems to jump / like that," he admits, the jump between lines testifying to Hugo's own master craftsmanship.[166] Yet while Hugo professes admiration for craftsmanship poetic and otherwise—and while his earlier Deep Image mode certainly embodies such craftsmanship—much of *31 Letters* is written in a newly-developed expressive mode evident even in the passages I've quoted. In *31 Letters*, Hugo pries apart a craft ideal that fuses expression and technical mastery. The interplay of these two aspects of craftsmanship is neatly suggested in "Letter to Wright from Gooseprairie," where technical mastery resurfaces in the form of a cautionary editorial voice. "And people seemed uglier," Hugo writes of the past, "more like the Bedfords were and probably aren't anymore / and more like people in war. I'm using too many r's."[167] For Hugo, this probing movement toward a more expressive mode enacts formally a growing skepticism toward the postwar university and its commodification of craft discourses.

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[166] Ibid., 286-287.
[167] Ibid., 303.

Hugo offers concise articulation of this line of thinking in "Letter to Mayo from Missoula," in which he entertains a series of retirement fantasies that encapsulate his ambivalence toward the university and the wider technocratic culture of which it is a part. In one fantasy, "the speeches ring / in the sunlight."

> All my students, twenty-five years of them
> cheer me as I rise to accept their acclaim. Some of them
> are famous poets and they stand up and say, 'It's all because
> of him,' pointing to me. I sob like Mr. Chips and their
> applause booms through my tears. I walk alone down the campus,
> their voices yelling my name behind me. I am crying
> in the car (new Lincoln) and my wife (28, lovely)
> comforts me as we speed to our vine and moss covered home
> on the lake where I plan to write an even more brilliant
> book than my last one, 'Me and John Keats,' which won the NBA,
> Pulitzer, APR, Shelley, Bollingen and numerous
> other awards and made me a solid contender for
> the Nobel.[168]

One would be hard-pressed to imagine a scenario more emblematic of literary institutionality, from the invocation of the 1934 campus novella *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* to the iconic new Lincoln—which embodies materially the cultural capital in Hugo's cornucopia of literary prizes—to the feedback loop established as Hugo's students, now "famous poets," point back at him in a tight cipher for the pyramid scheme that is the creative writing MFA. In this fantasy, Hugo becomes a "contender" at last, his rise-to-administrative-power symbolized in the literal ivy that envelops his suburban home. If Hugo cathectically binds himself to an institution he elsewhere figures as a "prison," however, he quickly settles on a more pragmatic retirement fantasy. "O.K. then this," he writes.

> I want to retire kind and hardheaded as you, to know
> not once did I leave the art, not once did I fail to accept
> the new, not once did I forget that seminal coursing
> of sound in poems and that lines are really the veins of men
> whether men know it or not.

It is here, in parataxis that perhaps reads like "seminal coursing," that Hugo most fully evinces an

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[168] This and all subsequent quotations of the poem come from Hugo, *Making Certain*, 306-307.

expressivist ethos, that aspect of the "craft ideal" which someone like Mike Gold so valued in championing the "jets of exasperated feeling" issuing from proletarian writers.[169] In the poem's closing signatory, Hugo doubles down on this ethos, rejecting poetic craftsmanship and extricating poetry from professional networks of exchange. "Leave labor to slaves," he closes the poem. "Give my best to / Myra and show this letter only to trustworthy friends. Luck. Dick."

"Lunch with J. Hillis Miller": On the McPoem

The poems of *31 Letters and 13 Dreams* not only offer a formal allegory for the institutional habitus of creative writing, then, but help rebut the widespread charge that the institutionalization of creative writing leads *ipso facto* to the commodification of American poetry.

Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr level a particularly compelling version of this charge in their 2010 essay "The 95cent Skool." Excoriating writing programs organized around "niche marketing of the well-made object," Clover and Spahr insist that "craft is not what's at stake. So, no endless condensing. No polishing bannisters. No lapidary work at all." While they offer little by way of an alternative, Clover and Spahr contend that the disarticulation of craft pedagogies from over-arching critical and theoretical discourses merely perpetuates "the division of labor in the academic factory," rejecting, therefore, "the incontestable object with the slack removed and the jointures hidden."[170] Such criticism has been as common from the avant-garde left—of which Clover and Spahr are part—as it has been from the literary establishment. Avant-garde poet Barrett Watten, for instance, argues that the "professionalization" of creative writing reinforces the "poetics and politics of a threatened petit-bourgeois personal life," while Geoffrey Hill—regarded for his intellectual rigor and

[169] Mike Gold, "Go Left, Young Writers!," *New Masses* 4, no. 8 (January 1929), 4.
[170] Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr, "The 95cent Skool," in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, ed. Joshua Marie Wilkinson (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 185, 186.

high moral seriousness—laments that contemporary poetry more closely resembles "home movies" than a sophisticated aesthetic practicum.[171]

Though I am sympathetic with such critiques, Hugo helps us rethink the idea that the practice of craft in the postwar university signals the inevitable entrenchment of the "workshop lyric" or "McPoem"—the poems of *31 Letters* are hardly the lapidary aesthetic gems nor the self-fascinated plaints that such critiques most frequently stereotype.[172] In fact, Hugo's represents exactly the kind of "critical art practice" that Watten advocates, "laying bare the device of its construction," albeit in a style all but illegible to the literary avant garde.[173] "I eat lunch with J. Hillis Miller," Hugo gushes in "Letter to Kizer from Seattle, "brilliant and nice / as they come, in the faculty club, overlooking the lake, much of it now filled in."[174] As Hugo's name-drop suggests, the contemporary workshop poem deconstructs its own craftedness. In Hugo, the alignment of poetry and university opens discursive space for a postmodern poetics characterized neither by abstract theoretical positioning nor outdated notions of aesthetic autonomy, but by reflexive attention to its own institutional being, to those values and discourses—including craft—that structure contemporary poetry as both commodity and fetish.

[171] Quoted in Christopher Beach, *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry Between Community and Institution* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 32. Quoted in Paul McLoughlin, "Paradigms, Fables and Notes," *PN Review* 13, no. 2 (November-December, 1986), NP. Hill's critique finds fuller expression in Jed Rasula's invocation of "home movie" poetry in what he calls the "first-person singular poetry hegemony" of "Poetry Systems Incorporated." See Jed Rasula, *Syncopations: The Stress of Innovation in Contemporary American Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 155.

[172] See Dooley, "The Contemporary Workshop Aesthetic," 260 and Donald Hall, "Poetry and Ambition," Academy of American Poets (ND), accessed December 12, 2019, https://poets.org/text/poetry-and-ambition.

[173] Barrett Watten, *Questions of Poetics: Language Writing and Consequences* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 8. Watten, *The Constructivist Moment*, xxiii.

[174] Hugo, *Making Certain*, 276.

Coda

A Grindstone Does Its Job: Or, What About Iowa?

In a dissertation purporting, as this one does, to uncover a distinct genealogy for the discipline of creative writing, one name may seem curiously absent.

Invoked by my count on fewer than half a dozen occasions, the Iowa Writers' Workshop has played a bit part within an historical drama in which it typically commands the starring role. Though histories of creative writing from Katherine H. Adams and D. G. Myers, for example, trace the discipline to turn-of-the-century composition courses at Harvard, both scholars devote significant space to the workshop at Iowa City, a radical reorientation, these scholars contend, in creative writing theory and practice.[1] More recently, Mark McGurl reads the Iowa Writers' Workshop as a "case study in [the] dialectical conjoining of opposites" that characterizes the practice of creative writing at Iowa and elsewhere. On the one hand, McGurl explains, the workshop at Iowa embodied "a new hospitality to self-expressive creativity on the part of progressive-minded universities"; on the other hand, workshop founders "rationalized their presence in a scholarly environment by asserting their own disciplinary rigor."[2] For McGurl, Iowa serves as the epicenter for an aesthetic and institutional habitus—"programmatic self-expression," he terms it—which I have traced instead to the American Arts and Crafts movement and its maintenance of a craft ideal.

If Iowa has occupied an outsized position in histories of creative writing, however, that position deserves reassessment less for the relative importance of Iowa itself—certainly the workshop there

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[1] In *A History of Professional Writing Instruction in American Colleges*, Adams identifies several Iowa-based precursors to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, including student writing clubs and workshop-style courses in "poetics" and "verse-making." Myers, meanwhile, reads the entrenchment of creative writing at Iowa as part of a broader New Humanist intervention in literary study, a claim I refine and expand upon in this coda. See Katherine H. Adams, *A History of Professional Writing Instruction in American Colleges* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1993), 85-133 and D. G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 124-160.

[2] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 129-130.

was and is an influential one—than for its tendency to conceal from hindsight those other institutions and ideologies that have shaped the discipline. This dissertation has been an attempt to tell another story about creative writing, one that bypasses Iowa City in order to track the practice to an Arts and Crafts culture with which the first creative writing "workshop," so called, was closely affiliated. In telling this story, I have focused on sites where the relation between work and writing was explicitly contested, from George Pierce Baker's 47 Workshop to institutions such as the Minnesota Labor School and Black Mountain College to the evolving genre of the poetry craft book. Within each of these institutions, I have shown, creative writing craft facilitated multiple aesthetic, institutional, and ideological objectives. More than merely a postwar pedagogical "adjustment," as McGurl claims, craft rhetoric has been integral to creative writing since its inception.[3] Not only did craft supply a set of values by which to reorient institutions of higher education—and in so doing to alter American literary theory and practice—but the mobilization of literary craftsmanship also allowed writers to stage a wider social intervention, helping them rethink the meaning and ramifications of labor writ large. While scholars of creative writing largely demur on assessing the broader economic consequences of the discipline, this project has traversed wide historical terrain—the entire twentieth century in fact—in order to demonstrate how writing craft migrated discursively from an alternative and non-rationalized mode of labor to a value system integral to the economic hegemony of American higher education. Exploring these stakes has meant asking what the discipline looks like without its most iconic institution—without Iowa.

In this closing coda, however, I gesture to the implications of literary craftsmanship at the first and most prestigious of the postwar programs in creative writing. For "the Workshop," as it is known, was hardly the first to use that name, and scholars of the program have overlooked the importance of writing craft in facilitating what was, at Iowa, nothing less than an institutional and

[3] Ibid., 93.

ideological coup. Specifically, I contend in this coda that creative writing craft provided the legitimating language for an insurgent attempt—Irving Babbitt's "New Humanism"—to transform literary study at the university level and, rather more ambitiously, to reconceive the relation between literary study and American democracy. At the Iowa Writers' Workshop, "workshop" worked double-time, figuring creative writing as a rigorous discipline while "disciplining" writers toward responsible civic participation. New Humanists like Babbitt, therefore, could be said to prioritize that aspect of an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal which tempered the craftsman's self-expression with rigorous adherence to technical standards; for Babbitt, those standards were supplied not by modernist aesthetics (as they were for John Dos Passos) nor by the resistances of craft material (as they were at Black Mountain), but by an inherited literary tradition and the cultural poetics that it entailed. If craft comes in the postwar era to consolidate the authority of elite educational institutions, as I argue above, at the University of Iowa that authority manifests in the production of democratic citizens grounded in traditional cultural values. To New Humanists, these values mattered more than ever during the first half of the twentieth century, a time when American democracy—and American-style capitalism—seemed increasingly imperiled by emergent totalitarianisms on both the Left and Right.

Extending the work of creative writing historian Eric Bennett, I show here how Iowa's "workshop of empire" was undergirded by craft rhetoric. Though Bennett devotes significant attention to Iowa as a bastion of liberal individualism in the Cold War-era, his cursory treatment of New Humanist ideology causes him to overlook the important fact that at the heart of the vast international project that became "the Workshop," was a workshop; the maintenance of New Humanist ideology—whether educational or imperial, literary or geopolitical—entailed a complex of rhetorical and material strategies linking work and writing.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the New Humanist iteration of an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal

figures prominently, then, in the work of two poets who studied at Iowa at the height of New Humanist influence there. In the poetry of Workshop director Paul Engle and graduate student Margaret Walker, Engle's advisee, we find a multi-faceted reckoning with the New Humanist circuit between literary discipline and democratic citizenship, as these writers respectively reinforce and deconstruct the craft of the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Irving Babbitt and Norman Foerster

"The power of restraint": New Humanist Craft

Perhaps no arts institutions outside of the Bauhaus has generated a greater number of retrospective memoirs and reminiscences than the Iowa Writers' Workshop. From anthologies of alumni recollections[4] to quasi-official Workshop-endorsed histories[5] to the legions of literary biographies in which successful graduates recall their time at Iowa with the wistfulness of childhood reverie, the Workshop has hatched a veritable cottage industry of firsthand accounts of "life, love, and literature at the Iowa Writers' Workshop."[6] Each of these accounts illuminates a slightly different aspect of the Iowa experience. In *We Wanted to be Writers*, Eric Olsen and Glenn Schaeffer use interviews with Iowa alums as the basis for their own memoiristic recollection of social life in Iowa City, the bohemian dance parties, Thursday nights at the Foxhead, and drunk readings from Pulitzer Prize-winners suggesting a consciously curated depiction of what Olsen and Schaeffer regard as the writer's life. In contrast, Robert Dana's anthology *A Community of Writers* sounds a more professional note, gathering accounts from Philip Levine on the pedagogy of John Berryman,

[4] See for example Robert Dana, ed., *A Community of Writers: Paul Engle and the Iowa Writers' Workshop* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999); Tom Grimes, ed., *The Workshop: Seven Decades of the Iowa Writers' Workshop* (New York: Hyperion, 1999); and Eric Olsen and Glenn Schaeffer, *We Wanted to be Writers: Life, Love, and Literature at the Iowa Writers' Workshop* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2011).

[5] See Stephen Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop: Origins, Emergence, & Growth* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1980).

[6] Olsen and Schaeffer, *We Wanted to be Writers*, NP.

for example, from Hualing Nieh Engle on the International Writing Project, and from Dana himself on the practice of creative writing craft at Iowa.

One anthology in particular, though, speaks closely to the endurance of New Humanist values at Iowa, including the broader ideological importance of craft-based pedagogies. In his introduction to *The Workshop: Seven Decades of the Iowa Writers' Workshop*, novelist Tom Grimes recalls learning quickly around the workshop table that "Romanticism's deification of the writer is the single most idiot aberration in the history of literature." As Grimes states, echoing a common New Humanist metaphor, "[w]riters are craftsmen, and as such all of our apprentice work is rough, inelegant, flawed. […] We enter the program possessing the skills of fledgling carpenters—if we're lucky—yet hoping to build palaces."[7] Though published in 1999, Grimes's introduction invokes pedagogical values established in the earliest days of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, when craft rhetoric served to undergird New Humanists' intervention in literary study as well as their systematic rethinking of the relation between literature and American democracy. Recovering the importance of craft rhetoric and pedagogies at Iowa thus requires understanding the multifaceted—and often contentious—cultural intervention that was the New Humanism.

Centered around the polemical figure of Irving Babbitt, the New Humanism's objectives were twofold. In the first place, Babbitt and his partisans sought to overturn regnant regimes of literary scholarship dedicated to philology and literary biography, modes of inquiry New Humanists perceived as overly scientific and contributive to a growing "separatism" in literary life.[8] Modeled after Germanic scholasticism, philology and literary biography exacerbated a critical dissociation of sensibility, neglecting the integrative, spiritual aspect of literary experience and its sustenance of the individual in his entirety. Alternatively, New Humanists attempted to teach literature in a more "literary" manner, advocating the kind of broadly cultural criticism which Myers and his mentor

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[7] Grimes, *The Workshop*, 5.
[8] Myers, *The Elephants Teach*, 139.

Gerald Graff associate with the origins of academic creative writing. "The goal—an educational one—was to reform and redefine the academic study of literature," Myers argues, "establishing a means for approaching it 'creatively'; that is, by some other means than it had been approached before that time, which was historically and linguistically."[9] Rather than accumulating literary historical or biographical facts, literary study should help preserve traditional cultural values, provide an intellectual foundation for educated decision-making, and cultivate sprezzatura-like "good sense" in both civic and cultural contexts. "The urgent need of the time," Babbitt disciple Norman Foerster wrote, "is a centripetal effort, a pulling together toward a common center as the condition of clear purpose."[10] A second objective of the New Humanism, alluded to in Grimes's craft rhetoric above, was to counteract what Babbitt and others perceived as the deleterious effects of Romantic expressionism—or, as Babbitt put it, "the eagerness of a man to get his own uniqueness uttered."[11] To New Humanists, a doctrine like Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" constituted reckless submission to emotion and the self-fascinated privileging of individual experience. Writers should strive not for individuality, New Humanists believed, but universality, to be representative. In his 1919 polemic *Rousseau and Romanticism*, Babbitt argued that the "*primary concern*" of the writer was the problem "not of expressing but of humanizing himself," and writers could do so, Babbitt maintained, only "by constant reference to the accepted standard of what the normal man should be." Accordingly, New Humanist pedagogy de-emphasized values like creativity, genius, and originality in order to prioritize aesthetic discipline and rigorous self-restraint. "Genuine culture," Babbitt summarized, "is difficult and disciplinary."[12]

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[9] Ibid., 4.

[10] Norman Foerster, "The Study of Letters," in *Literary Scholarship: Its Aims and Methods*, ed. Norman Foerster (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 29.

[11] Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), 46.

[12] Ibid., 55, 63. [emphasis in original] Of course, the New Humanist characterization of Romanticism relied to a large extent on caricature and stereotype. As Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre point out, Romantic "individualism" is "fundamentally different from that of modern liberalism," since it embodies the revolt of human subjectivity from the repressions of capitalist relations. Likewise, Jerome McGann reads Romantic expressionism as a

It is easy to see how such objectives lead to the adoption of creative writing craft as ethos and practice. One of the most effective ways of studying literature in a distinctly "literary" manner, for New Humanists, was to develop more imaginative or cultural forms of scholarship, among them creative writing. To appreciate literature properly, Foerster argued, one must also understand how to write it, since "the act of writing—the selection of materials, the shaping of them, the recasting and revising—enables the student to repeat what the makers of literature have done, to see the processes and the problems of authorship from the inside."[13] Within the context of established literary curricula, moreover, craft rhetoric like Foerster's—shaping, casting, making—helped promote creative writing as an intellectual pursuit as rigorous as philological source-hunting and as meaningful as biographical historicism. When the term "workshop" first appears in Iowa course catalogues in 1939—with its connotations of stolid, respectable labor—it replaces the more fanciful-sounding "Imaginative Writing," and a promotional piece from *The Daily Iowan* of that year frames the Workshop as serious professional inquiry, describing a "writers' workshop where students can do work toward publication."[14] Babbitt himself speaks to this function of creative writing craft—that is, as disciplinary intervention—in his 1908 *Literature and the American College*, where he imagines the kind of curricular overhaul his disciple Foerster will later implement at Iowa. "Any plan for rehabilitating the humanities [must entail] the finding of a substitute for the existing doctorate," Babbitt wrote. "What is wanted is a training that shall be literary, and at the same time free from suspicion of softness or relaxation; a degree that shall stand for discipline in ideas, and not merely for a discipline in facts."[15] That degree would become the MFA.

Coextensive with its projection of disciplinary rigor, craft also served as a form of discipline in its

multivalent attempt to transcend the "corrupting appropriation" of the world under capitalism. See Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 25 and Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 13.

[13] Foerster, "The Study of Letters," 26.

[14] Quoted in Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop*, 52.

[15] Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1908), 132.

own right, providing what Babbitt called an "inner check" or "restraint" on the expressive tendency of the egoistic self. "The power of restraint is peculiarly human," Foerster reiterated in 1930, insisting that "those who throw down the reins are simply abandoning their humanity to the course of animal life or the complacency of vegetables."[16] Similar to John Dos Passos's "technician" or the student-craftsmen of Black Mountain College, immediate engagement with the materials of literary construction—supplied for New Humanists by western tradition itself—worked effectively to shape, channel, and curtail the ever-present specter of self-expression. Just as in Baker's 47 Workshop, moreover, the collective labor of the workshop community ensured that individual self-expression would be tempered through the workshop process, subjected—if not to specific committees for staging, set design, or music, for example—to a range of perspectives that would mitigate and impinge upon the writer's self-expression.

But the New Humanism was more than merely a curricular intervention. It was also an attempt to stake out a distinct public role for poets, writers, and literary pedagogues. For New Humanists, the disciplining of self-expression—along with the education of the individual in his entirety, relying again on traditional cultural values—was integral to the maintenance of American democracy; New Humanists aimed to produce not simply student-writers, but responsible citizens. The workshop form represented a key step in this production process, offering training in miniature for the experience of citizenship within democratic institutions that likewise "act[ed] as checks on the immediate will of the people."[17] In *Rousseau and Romanticism*, Babbitt makes explicit the larger civic stakes for New Humanist pedagogies, contending that "the design of higher education, so far as it deserves the name, is to produce leaders" and that the "success or failure of democracy" depended

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[16] Norman Foerster, *Humanism and America: Essays on the Outlook of Modern Civilization* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1930), xiii.
[17] Irving Babbitt, *On Being Creative and Other Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932), 206.

on the ability of American universities to do so.[18] At the time when Babbitt was writing, of course, the success of democracy seemed very much in question. Published in 1919, two years after the Russian Revolution, *Rousseau and Romanticism* opposes responsible democratic citizens to socialist ideologues who would shift social responsibility "from one's self to the rich." For Babbitt, Rousseau seemed "very close to our most recent agitators. If a working girl falls from chastity," Babbitt parroted, "do not blame her, blame her employer. She would have remained a model of purity if he had only added a dollar or two a week to her wage."[19] "Romantic" expressionism was deleterious not only in its own right, then—and not only for the individual writer—but because it encouraged an evasion of civic duty, a tendency to excuse oneself from and shirk responsibility for collective life. As instituted at Iowa, creative writing craft buttressed a civilization constituted of "sound individualists who look up imaginatively to standards set above their ordinary selves," making it nothing less than a bulwark against the Red Menace.[20]

Bound up in New Humanist ideology, therefore, was an argument about American work and workers, about whose labor should be valued and whose discounted, about which workers should be singled out for social promotion and why. Specifically, Babbitt's opposition to socialist thinking registered frequently as a critique of what he perceived as the over-estimation of manual labor, the tendency—common to Romantic and socialist thought alike—to falsely dignify such labor in ways that reduced work to its lowest terms. Rather than rhetorically inflating the worth of manual labor, Babbitt held that educational institutions should promote the "higher forms of working"—i.e. mental labor and laborers—over and against those Americans who worked with their hands. New Humanists' investment in the language of craft should thus be distinguished from both an American Arts and Crafts craft ideal and the kinds of socialist thought promoted by original Arts and Crafts

[18] Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 294.
[19] Ibid., 129.
[20] Ibid., 286.

adherents such as William Morris and John Ruskin. Babbitt and his associates may have emphasized literary craftsmanship as a form of discipline, but they radically reconceived the social and political implications of such discipline. As David J. Hoeveler paraphrases, "[c]ivilization demands that certain persons be relieved from the necessity of working with their hands, and from this group should come its leadership class."[21] Though Foerster's statement that "the common man" should be more than "a mere worker" has the ring of egalitarianism, in fact the New Humanism constituted a deeply conservative—even aristocratic—cultural ideology.[22]

Indeed, his elitist impulse dwarfing even that of Babbitt, Foerster played the social eugenicist in arguing that "in its healthy estate, higher education is concerned with the fit, the large number of robust young men and women who are able to think, able to feel, able to liberate themselves." Acknowledging that universities should "serve state and nation" by providing education "in accord with a constitutional democracy," Foerster nonetheless intended such education as the privilege of the elite, invoking notions of a Jeffersonian aristocracy whose virtue and excellence would be imitated by the masses. In the increasing openness of American public universities, Foerster found troubling instantiation of Romantic ideology, lambasting the idea that all Americans deserved forum and opportunity for self-expression. "The state universities are accepting every manner of student, including many only slightly above the level of the defective, delinquent, and dependent," Foerster bemoaned.

> They are acting upon the devastating assumption, inherited from the romantic conception of the individual genius, that the special aptitude of each unique individual, no matter how pitiful it may be, should be given every opportunity to express itself. […] If this continues to be our ideal of well-being, the downward course of the state university will be swift.[23]

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[21] David J. Hoeveler, *The New Humanism: A Critique of Modern America, 1900-1940* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1977), 133.

[22] Norman Foerster, *The Humanities and the Common Man: The Democratic Role of State Universities* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1946), vi.

[23] Norman Foerster, *The American State University: Its Relation to Democracy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 184, 6, 198.

His contempt apparent, Foerster suggests how the New Humanism endeavored to reconceive the relation among literature, labor, and American democracy, in the process promoting certain forms of work as inherently more meaningful to the maintenance of western values.

"What the normal man should be": The Work of Workshop

If Babbitt was the New Humanism's founder, theoretician, and polemicist, Norman Foerster (pronounced "Firster) was its bureaucrat and bulldog, the figure most responsible for putting New Humanist values into practice. While the changes Foerster implemented at Iowa were hardly as draconian as his rhetoric might lead one to expect, they were nonetheless sweeping. Arriving from the University of North Carolina in 1930, Foerster immediately reorganized the departments of English, German, Classics, and Romance languages under his own administrative aegis in the School of Letters and Science, a means, he believed, of attacking narrowly professional "specialization." Additionally, Foerster added a wide range of courses in the liberal arts, including new offerings in classical literature, "Theory and Practice of Literary Criticism," and "Readings in the History of Humanism." In a move toward studying literature in more "literary" fashion, moreover, Foerster permitted the production of creative writing rather than scholarly research in fulfillment of certain doctoral requirements.[24] The Iowa Writers' Workshop was a direct result of this administrative restructuring, an effort to cultivate what Foerster identified as "aesthetic sensitivity" and to offer "rigorous discipline in the specialized types of literary activity."[25] As I've suggested, the craft pedagogies that undergirded the Workshop at Iowa ensured that writers there would not so much express as "humanize" themselves, the workshop supplying a model of—and rigorously enforcing—"what the normal man should be."[26] At Iowa, the delicate balance between self-expression and

[24] For more on Foerster's administrative shakeup at Iowa, see Hoeveler, *The New Humanism*, 120-121.
[25] Foerster, "The Study of Letters," 20.
[26] Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 55.

technical rigor that had comprised the American Arts and Crafts craft ideal was dramatically recalibrated to minimize writers' individuality. From this perspective, the perennial debate as to whether or not graduate programs in creative writing constrain writers' individual genius—whether, that is, such programs produce mere minor variations of the house style, the "workshop lyric"—seems moot. As Iowa indicates, this is their *raison d'être*.

The relationship between craft and expression at Iowa figures prominently in McGurl's landmark disciplinary history, *The Program Era*, where McGurl notes that the Workshop was "founded on the assumption that artists are forged in the imposition of […] institutional constraints upon unfettered creativity." McGurl attributes these constraints, though, not to a kind of New Humanist "inner check" but to New Critical and modernist impersonality, what he variously terms "Eliotic impersonality," "the classically modernist value of 'impersonality,' and the "New Critical idea of narrative impersonality."[27] To be sure, there were many links between the New Humanism and both Eliot and those New Critics who succeeded him; Babbitt echoes his student Eliot, for instance, in subordinating the "true modern" personality to "tradition," defining that term as "a completion and enrichment of present experience by that of the past."[28] But in addition to castigating much modernist writing as mere "sociological documents," New Humanists also eschewed New Critical aestheticism in favor of a broader, more moralistic and socially-oriented, "cultural criticism"—it was this orientation, I suggest, that influenced the early years of the Workshop at Iowa.[29] More convincing is McGurl's revelation of how Iowa's disciplinary ethos informs literary production within the program; he reads Flannery O'Connor's rigorously impersonal short stories, for example, as "passionate allegorical arguments for the necessary pleasures of the 'discipline' they so famously

[27] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 131, 23.
[28] Babbitt, *On Being Creative*, 27.
[29] Ibid., 219. Eliot himself distinguishes his own investment in "impersonality" from that of the New Humanism, lamenting especially the movement's lack of an authentic religious foundation. See Eliot, T. S., "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt," in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*: *The Critical Edition: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927-1929*, eds. Frances Dickey, Jennifer Formichelli, and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015): 454-462.

manifest."[30] The fact that the New Humanism rose to prominence nearly contemporaneously with the New Criticism, however—and that O'Connor's work can seem to so closely resemble Hemingway's—has concealed the ideological role that writing craft played in the New Humanist intervention that was the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Whereas the New Humanism entailed the production of more than "mere worker[s]," representations of labor and laborers would prove integral to the poetry and pedagogy of one of the earliest and most influential directors of the Workshop—Paul Engle. Director at Iowa from 1940 to 1965, Engle was also an Iowa alum, having received one of the first advanced degrees in creative writing for his Foerster-supervised thesis *Worn Earth*, a collection later selected by Stephen Vincent Benét for the prestigious Yale Series of Younger Poets. Across his work, Engle solidifies the New Humanist circuit between literary discipline and democratic citizenship, de-emphasizing the writer's self-expression in order to imagine a culture which was, as he would put it, "useful to the writer, friendly for the businessman, and healthy for the university."[31] As I will demonstrate, Engle's poetry and administrative work constitute an effort to marshal New Humanist values toward a postwar liberal consensus, no arbitrary or inevitable ideological formation, but—like so much at Iowa—a consciously crafted phenomenon.

Paul Engle

Plowing the deep furrows of the heart: Paul Engle and the New Humanism

In his 1934 blank-verse polemic, "Complaint to Sad Poets," Paul Engle—then only 26 years old—sounds every bit the tradition-bound, New Humanist curmudgeon, objecting to an expressivist strain in American poetry which had caused modernist writers to turn their backs on meaningful

[30] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 134.
[31] Paul Engle, "Dedication," in *On Creative Writing*, ed. Paul Engle (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1964), vii.

civic engagement. "Will you never be done with barking at the moon / Through the bleak hours of silver-blackened night?" Engle implores.

> Will you
> Always fear the world until you pour
> The strong wine of self-pity down your throats,
> Wiping your lips with trembling hands, and then,
> Drunk with the sickening liquor of yourselves,
> Find the yellow courage to stand up
> A feeble hour?

Part of his acclaimed second collection, *American Song*, the poem finds in bacchanalian self-expression—the passage evocative of Rimbaud, perhaps—a betrayal of the poet's social obligation, urging erstwhile "sad poets" to "reach upward to embrace / The wide, wind-trampled archway of the sky."[32]

True to form, *American Song* models precisely the kind of civic-minded poetics that Engle advocates, its Whitmanic anaphora and countless Homeric epithets establishing a vision of American civilization as an irrepressible, westward-tending empire. Peopled throughout with stock figures from American mythology—cowboys, Conestoga-borne pioneers, buffalo, fur-trappers, Native Americans, and outlaws, among others—Engle's New Humanist poetics also relies to a large extent on a rhetorical trope I have been tracking throughout this project, namely the figuration of writing as manual labor. In the "Troubadour of Eze," for example, written from Eze, Switzerland, where Engle had spent part of the previous summer, the budding New Humanist poet equates literary production with the "greater building" of civic improvement. "[W]ith the blue steel chisel of the mind," Engle writes, "Shaped by the hammer of a new world's dream, / And tempered in the clear frame of the heart, / There can be carved, from the quarried stone of time / A proud and shining symbol of new life."[33] The conceit reveals a great deal about Engle's incorporation of New Humanist values into his poetry—and eventually into his pedagogy and administrative work at Iowa.

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32 Paul Engle, *American Song* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1934), 80, 81.
33 Ibid., 62.

Whereas New Humanists like Babbitt and Foerster looked contemptuously on manual labor and laborers, Engle idealizes such work as a corollary for the poetic process; Engle's depiction of poetic introspection as a chiseling, shaping, hammering, and tempering, however, suggests his endorsement of the self-restraint so pivotal to New Humanist thinking. In Engle's figuration, the work of the poet is less con-structive than de-structive, a cutting through or planing away of emotional and intellectual dross within the "quarried stone of time" that is the blank verse poem. Moreover, the discipline of poetic labor matters for Engle because of its role in helping to produce responsible democratic citizens. In this passage and throughout Engle's poetry, self-making aligns metaphorically and materially with civilization-making, so that the vocation of poet entails both work on oneself and training toward democratic citizenship. "There is a mighty fate that hammers out / The iron form of continents," Engle declares, "breaking / The stubborn back of nations, bending kings, / Shaping the whole bright world in its hands."[34] For Engle, poetry is that breaking.

While Engle has attracted significant scholarly attention in recent years, much of this scholarship has focused in somewhat sensationalized fashion on his work as director at Iowa, in particular his transformation of the Workshop into a key instrument of American cultural diplomacy in the postwar era.[35] Engle's critical writing certainly licenses such an approach. In an article published in the June, 1937 issue of *The English Journal*, Engle maintains that "in these days of universal

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[34] Ibid., 55.

[35] Both Greg Barnhisel and Eric Bennett, for example, explore how Engle marshaled State Department and Rockefeller Foundation financing to promote a postwar liberal consensus and wage "cold war" via cultural programming. In similar fashion, Evan Kindley reads figures like Engle as "administrators" of culture whose institutional work—emerging necessarily from the collapse of earlier patronage networks—"help[ed] legitimate the floundering enterprises of American capitalism and liberalism." Relatedly, Mike Chasar argues that Engle's simultaneous work for the Iowa Writers' Workshop and Hallmark makes him an "aesthetic mediator" between high and low mid-century aesthetics. Finally, taking a somewhat different tack, McGurl focuses on Engle's work as the teacher of Flannery O'Connor, framing him as the hard-edged disciplinarian from whom O'Connor learned her rigorously "impersonal" style. See Greg Barnhisel, "Modernism and the MFA," in *After the Program Era: The Past, Present, and Future of Creative Writing in the University*, ed. Loren Glass (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 55-66; Eric Bennett, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing During the Cold War* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015); Evan Kindley, *Poet-Critics and the Administration of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 7; Mike Chasar, *Everyday Reading: Poetry Popular Culture in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 188-219; and McGurl, *The Program Era*, 127-179.

conscription a poet must be interested in an armament bill in Washington or Westminster and in the foreign policy of his own and all other nations."[36] Similarly, Engle dedicates his 1964 craft book *On Creative Writing* to a "heartening variety of individuals, foundations, and corporations who have refused to believe" in the "alienation of the writer from his times and country." Under Engle's tenure, the Workshop would prove no hermetically sealed cloister but an apparatus of American empire—or, as Engle put it, "an international community of the imagination."[37] Despite intensive scholarly focus on his institutional work, Engle is nowhere treated in the context of—as a student under and later advocate for—Babbitt and Foerster's New Humanism. Nor is Engle's poetry, much of it produced under Foerster's aegis, given anything other than short critical shrift, with the sole scholar to examine Engle's poetic output, Bennett, maintaining that "serious scholars don't care about his oeuvre." "In an age of compression, obliquity, obscure allusion, and experimental technique," Bennett explains, Engle "wrote in plain language and used old forms. [...] A Helen Vendler or a Harold Bloom has no reason to attend to his legacy."[38] Yet Engle's poetry was not only widely acclaimed in his own time, but frequently featured at the center of mid-century debates about the proper relation of the poet to his culture. If his work seems dated to our eyes—turgid, sentimental, jingoistic—its outmodedness has led scholars to underestimate the important intellectual development that takes place therein. For in Engle's mid-career trilogy—*American Song* (1934), *Break the Heart's Anger* (1936), and *Corn* (1939)—we find ideological scaffolding that will help construct the Workshop into a powerful force for postwar democracy, scaffolding braced and buttressed throughout with figurations of writing as work. Engle's trilogy, that is, models in both form and content his evolving relationship with New Humanist thought, especially as it bears upon his own and others' poetic output.

[36] Paul Engle, "Poetry in a Machine Age," *The English Journal* 26, no. 6 (June, 1937), 436.
[37] Engle, "Dedication," vii.
[38] Bennett, *Workshops of Empire*, 72.

Engle himself was no stranger to work. Born in Cedar Rapids to a farming family of German descent, Engle apprenticed from a young age in the training and selling of livestock, moonlighting in high school as a chauffeur, gardener, newspaper salesman, and drug-store clerk.[39] After graduating from nearby Coe College in 1931, Engle took his MA under Foerster at the university in Iowa City, eventually earning a three-year Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford, where he worked with poet and professor Edmund Blunden and became a close acquaintance of W. H. Auden, Cecil Day-Lewis, and Stephen Spender. It was during Engle's time at Oxford that *American Song* appeared in the United States to widespread acclaim, earning Engle, among other plaudits, a full front-page review in the *New York Times Book Review*. In the splash photograph that accompanies the piece, a boyish Engle sports both crew cut and crew-neck sweatshirt, looking every bit the respectable New Humanist acolyte turned Rhodes Scholar. Reviewer J. Donald Adams hails Engle's expansive American optimism, finding in his muscular cadences and patriotic myth-making "an indicator of changing mood and temper among creative writers of the youngest generation."[40] Though widely lauded—or perhaps because of such broad commendation—*American Song* also generated its fair share of critical responses. In *Poetry*, John Gould Fletcher derided Engle's faith in the "magnificent walking dream that somehow made this country," chalking such civic boosterism up to the misguided exuberance of youth.[41] Similarly, leftist writer Malcolm Cowley argued in *The New Republic* that Engle was not so much a poet as an "eagle orator." "He says all the proper things for a congressman to say," Cowley goes on, "when he wants to make his constituents forget about high prices and low wages and remember only that they are free-born Americans."[42] To millions of other Americans, however, Engle's red-white-and-blue-tinted lyricism seemed precisely the antidote to

[39] See Chasar, *Everyday Reading*, 194.
[40] J. Donald Adams, "A New Voice in American Poetry: Paul Engle's *American Song* May Prove a Literary Landmark," *The New York Times* (July 29, 1934), 31.
[41] John Gould Fletcher, "The American Dream," *Poetry* 45, no. 5 (February, 1935), 288.
[42] Malcolm Cowley, "Eagle Orator," in *Proletarian Literature in the United States: An Anthology*, ed. Granville Hicks (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 346.

Depression-era ennui, to the point that the collection briefly attained bestseller status, nearly as difficult a feat for a poet in the 1930s as it remains today.

The opening proem to *American Song* gives clear indication of the collection's can-do spirit—and, by extension, its ideological investments. Invoking a distinctly American *genius loci* in the manner of Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, Engle hails in characteristic parataxis the "Land of the Iowa cornfields endlessly rising, " of "Missouri hills where every man / Plows the deep furrows of his heart alone." Though he draws here on the etymology of "verse" in order to figure poetry as a form of interior cultivation, Engle idealizes not only agricultural labor but industrial work as well, describing the United States at the proem's conclusion as a "great glowing open hearth." "In you we will heat the cold steel of our speech," Engle proclaims.

> Rolling it molten out into a mold,
> Polish it to a shining length, and straddling
> The continent, with hands that have been fashioned,
> One from the prairie, one from the ocean, winds,
> Draw back a brawny arm with a shout and hurl
> The fiery spear-shaft of American song […][43]

Like his metaphoric plowman, Engle's industrial bard borrows his authority from the land itself, an autochthonous figure whose body spans and gathers to itself the entire continent. Engle's metaphor is also, of course, patently sexual in nature, as his Leviathan-like worker straddles the continent while gripping the "shining length" or "spear-shaft" of his language. If such a figure seems to recall Mike Gold's self-expressive proletarian, however—who wrote in "jets of exasperated feeling"—the work of Engle's industrial worker-bard is far more disciplined.[44] No mere expressivist venting, Engle's ideal poetry is "polish[ed]" to a hard shine, stamped out in the kind of "mold" that a New Humanist like Babbitt—with his concern for the normal—would no doubt have appreciated.

Engle's thinking-through of New Humanist values carries over to his 1936 collection *Break the*

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[43] Engle, *American Song*, xii.
[44] Mike Gold, "Go Left, Young Writers!" *New Masses* 4, no. 8 (January, 1929), 4.

Heart's Anger, where in "Epilogue at the Core of the Earth" he once again links poetic production to the production of democratic citizens. "You are the makers of another world," Engle exhorts his readers, themselves always potential workers and writers.

> You with your mortal hands. Build with fire,
> Desperation and blue tempered steel,
> The durable, dark stone that is the mind,
> Till the skyscrapers flower on their huge stalks,
> Your eyes become but clear intensities […][45]

As throughout Engle's poetry, the forging of self is coextensive with the forging of society, Engle's widely-used adjectives—"tempered," "clear," "durable"—suggesting his characteristically New Humanist emphasis on sobriety and restraint. Where *American Song* celebrated the limitless potential of American laborers, however, *Break the Heart's Anger* reveals those laborers as fundamentally betrayed by rigged economic structures; specifically, Engle laments that workers—along with the economic and spiritual promise they embody—have been sold out to financial interests whose speculative practices lead to underemployment, economic contraction, and spiritual lassitude. While manual labor remains meaningful, the "humble right to work" has been stolen.[46] Influenced by Engle's association with the Auden Group, *Break the Heart's Anger* is decidedly leftist in outlook, its charged social invective peppered throughout with references to Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, and Lincoln, the latter invoked as an indefatigable champion of the American masses. In mode, too, *Break the Heart's Anger* evinces leftist values seemingly at odds with the roaring American exceptionalism of a book like *American Song*; the poems in Engle's third collection are economic jeremiads in the proletarian tradition—beginning in plaint and ending in prophesy, heavily paratactic, and typically employing an accusatory second-person address in which "you" denotes those financial interests that have betrayed American workers.

In a high-altitude flyover of Engle's poetry, Bennett reads *Break the Heart's Anger* as a dramatic

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[45] Paul Engle, *Break the Heart's Anger* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1936), 189.
[46] Ibid., 87.

departure, therefore, from the main-line of his work. "In the 1920s, when he was a teenager, [Engle's] politics were one thing," Bennett argues. "[I]n the 1930s, another; in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, something else yet again. In each phase, his poetry changed too."[47] In fact, Engle's mid-career trilogy reveals a consistent if evolving relationship with New Humanist thought, a relationship which certainly takes distinct political hues, but which nonetheless remains committed to self-discipline as constitutive of American democracy. Contemporary reviewers recognized the consistency between *Break the Heart's Anger* and its more patriotic predecessor. Cowley, for example, argues that Engle "remains the orator rather than the poet. He delivers his orations on May Day now, instead of Fourth of July, but he delivers them in the same loose style bespangled with generalities" and "mixes his metaphors in a concrete mixer."[48] In *New Masses*, poet Ruth Lechlitner found herself wishing that Engle would "make a clean break from the romantic, I-suffer-for-my-country, adolescent attitude." Engle's "love of rhetoric," Lechlitner writes, "of emotional forensics, runs away with him."[49] Despite leftist overtones, *Break the Heart's Anger* remained rooted in traditional New Humanist values, these reviewers recognized, its workers lauded not in their own right—and certainly not as harbingers of some future socialist state—but because the discipline of their labor constituted a form of edification necessary to the maintenance of democracy.

And yet the language employed by these reviewers point to dramatic fissures within Engle's ostensibly New Humanist poetics. If Engle's subject matter models an ideal democratic discipline, his form betrays the restrictive nature of this discipline, with Engle's quite "loose" blank verse—not to mention his reliance on anaphora, epithet, parataxis, and other expansive techniques—"run[ning] away" from the formal and social restraint he sought to impose. Identifying Engle's poetics as both "emotional" and "romantic," Lechlitner suggests that authentic democratic experience may indeed

[47] Bennett, *Workshops of Empire*, 73.
[48] Malcolm Cowley, "Public Speakers," *The New Republic* 86, no. 1113 (April 1, 1936), 226.
[49] Ruth Lechlitner, "American Song, Revised," *New Masses* 19, no. 8 (May 19, 1936), 23-24.

be too boundless to be tempered by New Humanist discipline—the form of Engle's poetry, in other words, betrays an expressivist impulse its subject matter attempts to deny. As if to paper over this fissure, Engle insists again and again that to work the furrow of the poetic line or tend the dynamo of American speech really *is* to edify oneself for civic participation. Engle is speaking just as much about poetic as manual labors, for instance, when he hails "you givers of shape to all the vague and void, / Carpenters of the human, real creation, / Builders in the immortal ways of men."[50] The poet doth protest.

Engle's 1939 collection *Corn*, moreover—the last before he would take over as director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop—extends this set of labor metaphors to encompass not only the work of the poet but of the literary pedagogue as well. As Engle returns from Oxford to the Iowa cornfields of his birth, he announces a kind of mission statement for the pedagogical and administrative work that will become his primary focus. "Too long I went / With a great urge and shouting into life," Engle writes in the collection's title poem. "Now I will let it, like a change of season, / Come to me here. A grindstone does its job / By a perpetual turning in one place / Wearing itself down slower than the steel."[51] Figuring literary pedagogy as a sharpening of other implements—those that do the poetic "chiseling"—Engle explicitly echoes one of western culture's earliest creative writing pedagogues, refashioning Horace's ambition to "play the part of the whetstone, that can sharpen the knife though it can't itself cut." Without writing himself, Horace would "teach function and duty—where the poet's resources come from, what nurtures and forms him, what is proper and what not, in what directions excellence and error lead."[52] Trumpeting New Humanist discipline *avant la lettre*, Horace suggests just how rooted in tradition such values were, including, as I've suggested, the craft-based pedagogy of the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

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[50] Engle, *Break the Heart's Anger*, 126.
[51] Paul Engle, *Corn* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1939), 36.
[52] Horace, "A Letter to Augustus" in *Classical Literary Criticism*, eds. D. A. Russell and Michael Winterbottom (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 106.

Far from apprentice work, Engle's poetic output reveals how that pedagogy was undergirded by the linking of labor and literature, a rhetorical figuration which for New Humanists entailed profound social and political consequences. Re-assessing Engle's poetry helps us understand both the attitudes he would bring to his pedagogical and administrative work, as well as how New Humanist priorities informed a school of poetry that would become, at Iowa, America's official verse culture.

Margaret Walker

"A ten-poun' hammer ki-ilt John Henry": *For My People* and the Critique of New Humanism

While Engle's mid-career trilogy demonstrates the importance of craft rhetoric to the New Humanist mission, another Iowa poet would deconstruct precisely that rhetoric, undoing the circuit between literary discipline and democratic citizenship that Foerster and Engle hard-wired into the Iowa curriculum; in doing so, Walker makes explicit the revealing though unacknowledged fissure—between form and content, workers' expression and the discipline of labor—that cuts through Engle's work. A graduate student at Iowa during the first years of Engle's directorship, poet Margaret Walker challenges the New Humanist belief that disciplined labor eventuates in civic flourishing. She populates her MA thesis and Yale-winning collection, *For My People*, with workers whose lives have been maimed, impaired, and sometimes destroyed by the discipline of their work. Walker's poetry, I argue, constitutes the first in a long line of alumni disavowals of "the Workshop," in particular its reliance on what Walker figures as the stultifying and de-humanizing practice of creative writing craft. Though New Humanists like Babbitt and Foerster sought to enforce aesthetic and cultural discipline, not all Iowa writers proved as receptive to that discipline as Flannery O'Connor.

Born in 1915 to a Methodist minister and music teacher—embodiment, perhaps, of a dialectic

between discipline and expression that runs throughout her work—Margaret Walker came of age as a writer in the charged atmosphere of the 1930s, graduating from Northwestern University in 1935 and taking a job soon thereafter with the WPA-directed Federal Writers' Project. Walker would go on to become a leading figure in the Chicago Renaissance, a member of the famed South Side Writers Group whose friends and acquaintances would include Arna Bontempts, Gwendolyn Brooks, Fenton Johnson, Richard Wright, and others. Before she rose to national prominence with her 1966 novel *Jubilee*, Walker earned an MA in creative writing at the University of Iowa, her 1940 thesis *For My People*—produced under Engle's supervision—winning the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition two years later.

While Walker acknowledges that Engle "reawakened [her] interest" in the kind of folk ballads that appear in her thesis, it was Northwestern professor Edward Buell Hungerford who first inducted Walker into what she calls the "discipline" of writing craft. "Professor Hungerford drilled me in types and forms of English prosody and made me seek to master versification and scansion," Walker relates. To Hungerford, she goes on, "sonnets furnish[ed] the same discipline for the poet as five-finger exercises for the musician."[53] Walker's brief account of her coming-of-age as a writer, included as a preface to the collected edition of her poetry, also features several encounters that serve to encode the broader disciplinary structures of literary life—with Harriet Monroe at Northwestern, with Muriel Rukeyser at a cocktail party at the Chicago offices of *Poetry*, and with an unscrupulous vanity publisher who sought out Walker at a young age. "My mother […] paid to have four of my poems published," Walker writes. "At Northwestern I was shamed into the knowledge that I should never do that again."[54] Just as poet Richard Hugo found in creative writing a form of upward mobility into a mid-century professional-managerial class, Walker's career—including at Northwestern, Iowa, Yaddo, and as winner of the Yale Prize—testifies to how the mastery of

[53] Margaret Walker, *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), xiii, xv.
[54] Ibid., xii.

writing craft can provide entrée into the charmed circles of the properly "professional" writer.

Readers who expected from *For My People* a tight, quasi-New Humanist linkage of discipline and democracy, however, found instead a pointed critique of that line of thinking. Indeed, Walker puts self-expression and technical discipline in dynamic interrelation in order to pry apart what she reveals as a stilted and one-sided New Humanist craft ideal. To New Humanists, we will recall—and to a New Humanist protégé like Engle—the discipline of poetic and manual labor was intended to yield those "sound individualists" on which an American Century might be built.[55] In *For My People*, in contrast, Walker explores how the discipline of labor ultimately yields little more than continued economic insecurity, intra-racial violence, and death, stifling the very individuals—especially workers of color—who might most contribute to and benefit from a revitalized American democracy. As I will show, the poems in *For My People* testify powerfully to Walker's challenge of New Humanist values. But Walker also makes this challenge explicit in the preface to her collected poems. Whereas the New Humanist canon was restricted to western and primarily Greco-Roman tradition, Walker acknowledges wide-ranging influences on her work, from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* to the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh* to the *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad-Gita* from India. As Walker explained, "all of these are pre-Homeric epics which my white professors denied existed."[56] Similarly, Walker's preface frames *For My People* as a self-expressive account of her own experience as a black woman in the U.S. South; to the extent that her personal narrative approaches what Babbitt advocated as universal, representative, or "normal" experience, it does so as a document of the particular oppression faced by Walker and other black Americans. Walker's poems "express my ideas and emotions about being a woman and a black person in these United States—Land of the *Free* and Home of the Brave?"[57] Though written four decades after her time at Iowa, Walker's

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[55] Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 286.
[56] Walker, *This Is My Century*, xvii.
[57] Ibid., xvi. [emphasis in original]

statements offer sharp refutation of the kind of Cold War patriotism so carefully crafted under the banner of the New Humanism.

Despite its importance in the history of mid-century American poetry, *For My People* has received little scholarly attention.[58] This coda will not do justice to the complexity of that text, but I do want to gesture to how the collection questions craft discourses not only as they contribute to the mission and identity of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, but as they buttress the broader cultural and political intervention New Humanists proposed. Walker herself was uniquely positioned to think through the implications of this intervention. A graduate student at Iowa in the late 1930s and early 1940s, she witnessed firsthand a bout of departmental infighting over New Humanist influence there; though the conflict would grow to encompass much of the English and creative writing faculty, it centered on Foerster and the man who would disassemble his broad New Humanist curriculum: recently appointed dean and progressive educator Harry K. Newburn. Newburn's counter-revolution would have a significant impact on the theory and practice of writing craft at Iowa, and his influence resulted in the short term in Foerster's resignation from the School of Letters and Science which he had established.[59] Walker's own work, this is to say, refracts institutional tensions that must have been very much a part of the Workshop experience during her time at Iowa.

As a collection, *For My People* is divided loosely by form into three sections. The poems in the first section, including the well-known title poem, employ long-lined free-verse strophes that rely to a large extent on anaphoric invocation. The fact that Walker credits Richard Wright with helping her to develop this "long line or strophic form" suggests the necessity of looking outside the strictures of the Iowa Writers' Workshop for a poetics more expressive of African-American

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[58] Most recently, Derek Furr positions the collection alongside the anthropological work of Alan Lomax, reading its ballad forms in particular for their performance of African-American "folk" identity. Similarly, William Scott explores Walker's investment in "what it means, historically, to *be* and to *belong to* a people." See Derek Furr, "Re-Sounding Folk Voice, Remaking the Ballad: Alan Lomax, Margaret Walker, and the New Criticism," *Twentieth Century Literature* 59, no. 2 (Summer, 2013), 232-259 and William Scott, "Belonging to History: Margaret Walker's *For My People*," *MLN* 121, no. 5 (December, 2006), 1083-1106.

[59] For more on Newburn's influence at Iowa, see Hoeveler, *The New Humanism*, 121.

experience. In contrast, the second and third sections of *For My People* consist of traditionally metrical or "formal" verse, respectively featuring character-sketch folk ballads in African-American dialect and tightly crafted sonnets steeped in Walker's childhood reminiscences. The collection's formal heteroglossia—what Cary Nelson has called its "plural textuality"—therefore embodies in miniature a craft ideal which, as I establish in previous chapters, joins together expression and restraint, aesthetic freedom and technical discipline.[60] Though New Humanists like Babbitt and Foerster did not conceive their work in relation to the American Arts and Crafts movement, such an ideal nonetheless loomed large in their thinking. Contemporary commentators identified this same ideal in *For My People*. In his foreword to the collection, Yale judge Stephen Vincent Benét noted its combination of expressive "straightforwardness" and "controlled intensity of emotion."[61] Writing in *The Saturday Review*, George Zarriskie found the collection's free-verse strophes reminiscent of evangelical "exhorters" while its ballads and sonnets established Walker's reputation as a "technical virtuoso."[62] On the surface, that is, *For My People* exhibits strong similarities with Engle's own poetry, since the latter's loose blank verse housed an irrepressible—even, dare we admit, self-expressive—voice akin to that of Whitman and Wordsworth. In other ways, too, Walker's poetry resembles that of her supervisor, Engle's influence evident in everything from Walker's use of anaphora to the prominence of agrarian imagery in the collection to her repeated linkage of poetry and manual labor. "I want to walk along with sacks of seed to drop in fallow ground," Walker confesses in the poem "Sorrow Home," sounding very much the Iowa horse-trader turned poet and pedagogue. "I want the cotton fields, tobacco and the cane."[63]

A poem like "Big John Henry," however, reveals how Walker draws on Engle's poetics in order

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[60] Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 178.
[61] Stephen Vincent Benét, "Foreword to *For My People*," in *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 3.
[62] George Zarriskie, "The Poetry of Margaret Walker," *The Saturday Review* (September 11, 1943), 19.
[63] Walker, *This Is My Century*, 12.

to reconsider its implications. Just as Engle's poetry comes peopled throughout with stock characters from American mythology, "Big John Henry" narrates in rough ballad form the "tale of a sho-nuff man" who "useta work for Uncle Sam." As Walker's metonymy suggests, Henry's labor on farm, steamboat, and rail line are essential to the construction of American empire. In Walker's treatment, though, Henry's work is also destructive of his own raced and classed body. At the poem's conclusion, its lilting ballad meter breaks down into lines half the length of those that precede them, formal instantiation of Henry's physical breakdown: "But a ten-poun' hammer ki-ilt John Henry, / Bust him open, wide Lawd! / Drapped him ovah, wide Lawd! / Po' John Henry, he cold and dead."[64] Here as throughout *For My People*, the discipline of manual labor, enacted formally in the discipline of Walker's poetic line, produces not so much a responsible democratic citizen as an expended—because expendable—American worker. And similar characters—maimed, stunted, or killed by the discipline to which they are subjected—recur throughout the folk ballads in *For My People*, to the point that the collection seems a kind of catalogue or accounting of the victims of an ostensibly democratic civilization.

So too do Walker's first-person lyrics levy sharp critique of the promise that Engle finds in manual labor. Most explicitly, a set of paired sonnets near the end of the collection indicts Engle's idealization of agrarian work and workers. The first, "Iowa Farmer," opens with the pastoralism we might expect from an Engle apprentice, the eponymous farmer's work evincing his close union with and stewardship of his land. At the poem's volta, however, Walker complicates this pastoral mode, writing that "in the Middle West where wheat was plentiful; / where grain grew golden under sunny skies / and cattle fattened through the summer heat / I could remember more familiar sights." It is an abrupt, somewhat riddling conclusion to the poem, one that gestures obliquely to a critique made more explicit on the facing page. There, in an accompanying sonnet titled "Memory," Walker

[64] Ibid., 44, 45.

juxtaposes to the previous poem's amber waves of grain a set of images drawn from African-American urban life, including "wind-swept streets of cities / on cold and blustery nights" and "hurt bewilderment on poor faces, / smelling a deep and sinister unrest." For Walker, it is these "more familiar sights" that constitute the true legacy of American democracy, as the "living distress" of tenement dwellers, homeless, and un- and under-employed workers offers stark contrast to an ever more incredible "Iowa farmer."[65] Serving as the structural and emotional apogee of *For My People*, the pair of sonnets is a masterful reassessment of the New Humanist craft ideal, in particular its tendency to idealize discipline as a mode of spiritual and social uplift. While the sonnets' technical virtuosity points to Walker's mastery of poetic craft, their rhetorical treatment of labor and laborers suggests how the New Humanist vision extends only to certain forms of work, certain workers.

In these sonnets and throughout *For My People*, Walker makes visible the incipient aristocratic tendencies in a New Humanist craft ideal, showing how such thinking is predicated on the evasion of those material realities that determine the experience of the majority of American workers, especially workers of color. Walker's work constitutes an important foundation, therefore, for contemporary poets like Tyehimba Jess, Mark Nowak, and Claudia Rankine, who remind us not simply of the discriminatory legacy of the New Humanism but of how the very idea of writing craft—especially disseminated within institutional settings—can lead to the suppression of underprivileged voices. As Walker writes, "we tend the crop and gather the harvest, / but not for ourselves do we labor."[66]

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[65] Ibid., 48, 49.

[66] Ibid., 17. In an extended version of this coda, I show how Walker's debut collection provides a foundation for her later activist work on behalf of African-Americans, including her work, while a professor at Jackson State University, to spearhead a nascent Black Studies movement that would itself transform the theory and practice of the creative writing workshop.

"The Iowa Writers' Workshop nearly broke me;" or, The Disavowal

Neither in her poetry nor her public statements, admittedly, does Walker indict Engle, Foerster, or the Iowa Writers' Workshop as contributing to the stultification of American democracy, nor does she express misgivings about her own experiences in Iowa City. The graduate thesis she produced there, however, serves as a document of disavowal of both the Workshop and those discourses—including New Humanist craft rhetoric—that sought to link poetic and manual labor to responsible citizenship.

Read this way, *For My People* constitutes the first in what would become a long line of alumni disavowals of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, disavowals particularly common among writers of color. "[W]e got the craft thing at Iowa," Sandra Cisneros explains, "but we didn't learn about the *why*, why we write what we write, or for whom. […] [W]e learned the 'how,' but not the 'why.' I mean, all the things about craft are important, but they're secondary to who we write for and why."[67] More recently, Yale-winning poet Eduardo C. Corral has stated that "the Iowa Writers' workshop nearly broke me. My talent was dismissed. My doubts were amplified."[68] Such disavowals point to the fissures within the New Humanist-turned-professional-managerial discourse that is creative writing craft, revealing how the language of the writing professional—like the closed guild of the workshop in which it is disseminated—encodes its own fraught racial politics.

Of course, these disavowals are themselves carefully crafted pieces of rhetoric. Downplaying the influence of professionally enabling institutions like Iowa, they portray the literary artist as a resilient "talent" whose deserved success comes despite, not because of, his participation in bureaucratic systems of literary licensure. Ironically, in their reliance on a stereotype of the expressive artist hampered by disciplinary constraints, these writers activate a craft ideal which testifies unwittingly to

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[67] Quoted in Olsen and Schaeffer, *We Wanted to be Writers*, 217.
[68] Eduardo C. Corral, Twitter post, December 5, 2017, 5:32 PM.

the ideological power of the very institutions they disavow.

Situating these rhetorical gestures within an institutional and cultural history of "the workshop," however, allows us to envision with renewed clarity the ambit or argumentative sweep of this project writ large. For I have shown, I hope, how creative writing craft migrates discursively in relation to industrial- and informational-corporate economies, evolving from an alternative, non-rationalized discourse and labor practice to a language which—quite literally—works to subordinate individuals to those institutions that administer postwar life. The Iowa Writers' Workshop was one such institution, but to name it—to fix it in time and place, as if it were an isolable phenomenon—is to imagine that we could ever exist outside of those institutions, to imagine that we are not, even now, the real work they are crafting.

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