UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Three Very Short Poems:

The Verbal Economics of Twentieth-Century American Poetry

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in English

by

Jeremy A. Schmidt

2020

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Three Very Short Poems:
The Verbal Economics of Twentieth-Century American Poetry

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Michael North, Chair

This study examines three very short poems from three distinct moments in recent literary history in order to determine the limits of the poetic virtue of concision and to consider the social and aesthetic issues raised by extreme textual reduction. Attending to the production, circulation, and afterlives of Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" (1913), Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" (1959), and Aram Saroyan's "lighght" (1966), I argue that such texts necessarily, and yet paradoxically, join simplicity and ease to difficulty and effort. Those tense combinations, in turn, make these poems ideal sites for examining how brevity functions as a shared resource through which writers define and redefine what constitutes poetic labor and thus negotiate their individual relationships to the poetic tradition. In tracing those negotiations, *Three Very Short Poems: The Verbal Economics of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* participates in the ongoing reassessment of the relationship between literary modernism and mass culture by foregrounding art-poems that have reached unusual levels of popularity. Each of the three central chapters combines standard literary and reception history with formal analysis in order to tease out how the origin of a specific famous poem relates to its subsequent reprintings and reworkings. Throughout, I treat textual economization as a set of formal techniques whose variable meanings are determined by how those techniques emerge from and respond to historically located discourses of brevity. Each chapter functions as a distinct case study of a particular issue—knowledge-work and efficiency at the turn of the century, racial and economic inequality in the immediate postwar era, intellectual labor and social support in the late 1960s—and this means that each makes its own independent claims, even as the chapters argue collectively that a commitment to brevity as a value in itself unifies the diverse poetic field of the twentieth century.

The dissertation of Jeremy A. Schmidt is approved.

Todd S. Presner

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Brian Kim Stefans

Michael North, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2020

For my parents

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank the members of my committee for their guidance and deep patience in seeing this project through. I have been distinctly fortunate to have in Michael North a mentor who makes modernism a continuously compelling question while modelling good judgment and true wit at every turn. Brian Kim Stefans made these pages possible with his enthusiasm for the small details and his attentiveness to the act of writing. Mark Seltzer warmly welcomed a project on "the form of form." And Todd Presner from early on reminded me to keep the original avant-garde in mind.

Thanks also to Sianne Ngai for generous advice at the outset and to Marjorie Perloff for reintroducing me to the poetry of Ezra Pound. Thanks to Donka Minkova for an inspiring seminar at the beginning of graduate school and to Harryette Mullen for another toward the end. Thanks to Chris Looby and Michael Cohen for the opportunity to present an early version of a portion of this project at the Americanist Research Colloquium. Thanks to Ron Silliman for his thoughts on a later version of that same section. Thanks to Angela Deaver Campbell for providing a second sanctuary on campus; to Sonia Maasik for being an advocate and an ideal co-instructor; and to Chris Mott for making the relays between scholarship and teaching seem inevitable.

Graduate school was made immeasurably more exciting and joyful by the companionship and brilliance of Jacquelyn Ardam, Donal Harris, Brendan O'Kelly, and Tara Fickle. Los Angeles itself was made intimate and navigable by Saehee Cho, Adam Farkas, Chris Wu, and Russell Eida. Thanks to Nasia Anam, Sarah Chihaya, Elisabeth Houston, and Jay Jin for chats of all kinds, both in and out of LA, and for responding to impulsive queries about irrelevant poems.

Thanks to Rebecca Lippman for vital Zoom writing sessions and to Sonja Chai for abundant kindness and thoughtful feedback. Thanks to Alison Leff, Kian Dowlatshahi, Aaron Rosenberg, and Ricky Townsend for a lifetime of friendship, and to Noah Meites for schlepping that friendship from Chicago to California.

I am grateful, over and over, to Chris Hoyman for his limitless camaraderie and to Danny Ornstein for providing the kind of support that most thoroughly blends the material and immaterial—a home, when I needed it most. And I am thankful, above all, to my parents and sister for being there no matter what.

VITA

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“Minimal Efforts: The Poems of Aram Saroyan,” UCLA Americanist Research Colloquium. April 2014.

“Imaging Labor: Ezra Pound’s ‘Contemporania,’” Modernist Studies Association Conference, Buffalo, NY. 2011.

“The Ordinary Reading, Laughter, and the Virtual Page,” Modernist Studies Association Conference, Buffalo, NY. 2011.

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“Clone Fiction,” Stanford Comparative Literature Conference, Palo Alto, CA. 2011.

“Ezra Pound and the Rhythms of Work,” M/ELT Research Group, UCLA. 2011.

“northText v1.0: A Digital Concordancing Tool” (co-presenter), MLA Convention, San Francisco, CA. 2008.

INTRODUCTION

On Not Saying More

1. Two or Three Problems of Brevity

This project is about thirty-nine words. It treats three very short and widely circulated twentieth-century American poems—Ezra Pound's two-line "In a Station of the Metro" (1913), Gwendolyn Brooks's twenty-four word "We Real Cool" (1959), and Aram Saroyan's seven-character "lighght" (1966)—as case studies in order to consider what we might call, repurposing a geopolitical euphemism, poetry's "special relationship" to brevity. Through these three jagged prisms, as well as that which they draw in and refract, the following pages examine what Philip Fisher terms "the question of the limits of the tiny event" (162). What can we learn by observing poems as they approach "the fewest possible words" or even "an infinitely small vocabulary"?[1]

In one sense, what follows traces that approach across exemplary early, mid, and late century poems that are progressively less invested in asserting their own substance. However, if in moving forward in time we might be inclined to discover a trajectory, or even teleology, toward the limits of media themselves (mere ink, hollowed-out language, blank pages), I will be less interested in outlining a clean narrative or absolutist notion of *lessness* than in exploring the problems raised by verbal reduction as a set of diverse and flexible practices bound up with specific "discourses of brevity" at particular moments in history. Pound, Brooks, and Saroyan are seriously and differently committed to brevity in ways that speak not only to the hypothetical or actualized limits of language but to the power and problems of that commitment itself. Because reduction manifests as a tendency within poetics, or the making of texts, rather than as a genre within poetry, I will only on occasion be concerned to provide generalized descriptions of something like the Very Short Poem. Instead, I highlight how the formal pressures generated by techniques of concision play out at different times in different texts.

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[1] The first phrase comes from John Ruskin, *The Political Economy of Art* (1857), 223; the second from Jack Spicer, *After Lorca* (1957), n.p.

Two of those pressures are foregrounded in my case studies, and it will be helpful to sketch each of them here at the outset (with the caveat that such sketches necessarily gloss over certain distinctions). The first, a problem of production, is that very short texts can seem at once to be *emblems of ease* and to *require outrageous labors*. Our ordinary language for describing the short text registers this tension. On the one hand, we can think of the *note*; on the other, the *gem* and the *brief*. The former is understood to be a casual and ephemeral genre of scribbling or typing, produced with minimal effort, but it is also process-oriented and frequently directed back to the writer (as in "note to self") or as an outward instruction (as in "giving notes"), with the implication that there is more work to be done. Meanwhile, we speak of a *gem* (as in my use of "prisms" above) or a *brief* to describe the small piece of language that has been carefully constructed, perhaps even vetted, workshopped, focus-grouped, or peer-reviewed within an inch of its marginal life. Not unlike the *note*, these highly crafted genres veer toward vacuity at their extremes. Likewise, the very short poem appears—at times simultaneously—over- and underworked as the greater or lesser efforts behind its production excise their own traces. Think of how William Carlos Williams's "This Is Just to Say" (1934) activates the generic conventions of the note to squeeze the spot where writing briefly can seem at once comfortably easy and penitently hard, both sweet and cold.

The second key problem of brevity is that it can be understood as both *hyperactively social* and *forbiddingly asocial*. Terseness enables a text's uptake, memorization, and repetition, yet it may read as obliquity or reticence. Consider in this light the subgenres of the *fragment* and the *refrain*, each slight and each apt to disseminate. The *fragment* we readily know as that sliver which simultaneously severs and forms associations. Its potency for philosophies of art and language, whether accessed by the routes of German Romanticism or transnational modernism, derives precisely from its paradoxical compound of unyielding fragility. Yet even the congenial snap of the *refrain* turns asocial at its extremes. In Mark Twain's "A Literary Nightmare" (1876), for instance, the narrator tells of being overtaken by a snatch of newspaper verse, most especially the couplet that makes up its "chorus": "Punch, brothers! punch with care! / Punch in the presence of the passenjare!" (167). By ceaselessly inciting its own repetition, the brief text renders "Mark" a mere punch-hole of personhood, useless for both duty ("The day's work was ruined") and conversation ("I said nothing; I heard nothing"). The "remorseless jingle" later infects a funeral audience, turning the mourners into a veritable emblem of socialized asociality: a field of "absent-minded … stupid heads … bobbing" in the winds of rhythm (169). As parts of larger wholes, then, the *refrain* and the *fragment* diffuse readily into the world, but they are severely limited in their ability to engage the new contexts in which they find themselves. Williams's plums poem likewise rattles over and over—most recently in the frequent parodies and reworkings that have become a small staple online—yet unlike Twain's slick refrain it shifts slightly with each reuse, even as it still seems to not say enough.[2]

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[2] The reworkings of "This Is Just to Say" may well have begun with Williams himself in "Reply," from an undated typescript published in 1982, well after his death in 1963 (*Collected Poems*, Vol. I 536). Kenneth Koch's "Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams" (1962) remains the most influential parody (10). On the recent waves of Williams-style tweets (in mid 2015 and late 2017, especially), see Lowrey, Romano, Kircher, and Doogan.

The very short poem—as a whole that approaches the size of its parts—thus complicates the dynamics of the genres of brevity I have just described by remaining in touch with all of them. In that compounding, poetic brevity exacerbates the gap between the form it takes and that form's initial frames. Shortness, in other words, enables and inflates the distance between its text and that text's site of composition. Peter Murphy captures this risk in his chronicling of the sixteenth-century lyric "They Flee from Me" (1535) when he writes, "But even as Wyatt stamps this version with his approval, culture has caught his poem up and is whirling it away from him" (25). We are familiar with such whirling, of course, living as we do amid a flurry of microtexts: comments, posts, texts, tweets, emails, emojis, listicles, memes, samples, screenshots, sound bites, video clips, "the like," and the like. Yet that diffusive sociality is countermanded by the simple refusal at the heart of brevity. Voided of context and limited, by definition, in its capacity to self-contextualize, the brief work can at times seem to constitute an antisocial medium. Particularly as it approaches what Susan Sontag in "The Aesthetics of Silence" (1967) calls the "point of final simplification," it may strike us as broken, null, or negative, as if refusing to associate—by working simultaneously too hard *and* too little (11, 7). This Bartlebian aspect of the clipped is the flip side of the short poem's breezy uptake into world. We might hear this as something like the overlap between the avant-gardism of John Cage's *4'33"* (1952) and the pop of Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence" (1965).

Taking that overlap seriously challenges certain assumptions we frequently bring to modern poetry. Whether pigeonholed as primarily personal or fiercely recalcitrant, the short poem is widely perceived to be less social and less labored over than its larger cousins. Even as brief poems remain favored for public events such as funerals, weddings, and inaugurations, we are tempted to see them as serious or political only when incarnating Adornian resistance or, conversely, when at their most seeming-transparent. Such assumptions are especially pronounced in the contrasts we draw between the short poem and its apparent opposite. The long poem is understood to participate in a number of genres and modalities engaged (more or less critically) with history, from narrative and epic to collage and "documentary poetics." Defining that last term, Adalaide Morris writes,

> While imagism led to such brief, intense poems as Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" (1913) or H.D.'s "Oread" (1914), the turmoil following World War I drew modernists toward longer hybrid forms that could *include* historical, civic, scientific, legislative, or journalistic information. The public records *embedded* in such works … are documentary in both senses of the word: they turn, i.e., empirical, historical fact to passionate political use. (373, emphasis added)

Whether appearing after WWI or WWII, the ventures to which Morris refers are *ingestive*. Muriel Rukeyser's capacious *The Book of the Dead* (1938) includes testimonials and Congressional reports related to what was at the time the largest industrial accident in the U.S. to date. Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) turns psycho-pharmaceutical and media saturation inside out by ingesting not only graphics, lists, and footnotes, but also entire short poems by Czesław Miłosz and Paul Celan. If each of these books incorporates wide-ranging documents into the body of poetry, the successful very short poem administers something like the inverse of documentary: its own incorporation into the social body. Pound referred to "epic," as well as his own formidably long attempt at the genre, as "a poem including history."[3] Inverting that formulation, we can see not only his "In a Station of the Metro" but Brooks's "We Real Cool" and Saroyan's "lighght" as poems *included in* history. And if by articulating the tension between seeming worked and unworked (and thus including history through condensation) such poems remain partly resistant, their accrual of afterlives may inflect (rather than ignore or erase) the traces of their original making in time.

As the numerical misalignment between my three case studies and the two major problems of brevity I have highlighted suggests, it is tempting to split the second problem into analytically distinct issues: one of circulation (in which the short text is easily reproducible and thus experiences "context collapse") and one of reception (in which the short text may seem either readily approachable or reservedly asocial, either populist or modernist).[4] My judgment, however, is that these two tensions are fundamentally entangled; presenting them as strands of a single problem preserves that unity without negating our ability to highlight one or the other as necessary. In any case, both (or all three) of these problems play out unevenly across my case studies. If at first glance Pound seems most concerned with poetic production by way of excision, Brooks with the circulation of small phrases, and Saroyan with minimal perceptual differences, the problems of brevity interact in their work in unpredictable ways that belie straightforward schematization. The most fruitful analyses will necessarily take place at their sites of intersection. Prior to overviewing those case studies themselves, though, I will take measure of a few general, generic, and technical associations between shortness and poetry. This will entail zooming in (as we say) from poetry, to lyric, to exemplary language.[5]

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[3] Pound's "An epic is a poem including history" appears in "Date Line," first published in *Make It New* (1934) (*Literary Essays* 86, hereafter LE). In 1962 he states, "An epic is a poem containing history" (D. Hall 57).

[4] On "context collapse," see boyd, 34-41. I borrow the phrase to refer, rather simply, to the situation in which a text circulates devoid of its original frame.

2. The Means of Reduction

At some level the longstanding link between poetry and brevity is predictably overdetermined. Since at least the mid-eighteenth century, when aesthetics begins coalescing into a modern field of study, it has been common to connect literary *poiesis* to all manner of lessness. Immanuel Kant for his part arrives at that link toward the beginning of his "sketch of a possible division of the fine arts" (Pluhar 5:321). There he begins with "the arts of speech," which are two: oratory and poetry. Unlike the orator, "the poet," in Kant's distinction, "promises little and announces a mere play with ideas." As an earlier translator has it, if the "poet's promise" is "a modest one," that simply means "the orator in reality performs less than he promises, the poet more" (Meredith 5:321). This less-is-more relation is in fact baked into much of the discourse surrounding poetry, and by the end of the nineteenth century, with the advent of various modernisms, it becomes if anything more secure. In our own time, it is both popularly taken for granted and exceptionally generative of new research. Within the discipline of literary studies, it bears markedly on much of the most rewarding scholarship on (and adjacent to) the subfield of poetry and poetics.[6]

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[5] On the language of "scale" in literary studies, see Jin, 105-21.

[6] The titles alone, in what we might call "limit and lessness studies," convey something of the range of associations between poetry and "the value of *less*" (Nersessian 22): Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (1991); Woods, *The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (2002); Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde" (2005); Cole, "Rethinking the Value of Lyric Closure: Giorgio Agamben, Wallace Stevens, and the Ethics of Satisfaction" (2011); Nicholls, "Modernism and the Limits of the Lyric" (2011); Nersessian, *Utopia, Limited: Romanticism and Adjustment* (2015); Brown, *The Limits of Fabrication: Materials Science, Materialist Poetics* (2017); and B. McGrath, "Understating Poetry" (2018). Important examples engaged with post-1900 poetics but framed by less immediately parsable titles include the discussion of "accounts of personhood that are distinctly *thin* or minimal" in Izenberg, *Being Numerous* (2011), 22;

To take measure of one episode in the forging of that special relationship, it will be helpful to turn to a piece of criticism from the beginning of the period my own study explores. Richard Aldington's "Modern Poetry and the Imagists" was published in Dora Marsden's London-based *The Egoist* in June 1914. If the piece has been largely forgotten, that fact may be as much a result of its sheer representativeness as of its appearance on the eve of war. Its columns collate a veritable catalogue of the ways in which poetry is understood to be brief. Aldington begins by fretting, "the title I have written at the top" means readers "will probably turn the page and find something which interests them more keenly—Mr. Joyce's novel, or correspondence about sexual pleasures, or something like that" (201). The competitive media environment that Aldington laments is close at hand: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) was halfway through its serialization in the same publication, with an installment on offer just a few pages down from his review essay. The contradistinction between Imagism and Joyce (who after all appears in the Imagist anthology that is one of the three books under review) is less striking than the way in which Aldington's distinction between poetry and fiction mushrooms into a series of contrasts in size. The likely existence of his page-flipping non-readers "is somewhat humiliating to me," our critic explains,

> not because I object to people not reading my articles—they have every excuse for that—but because when you give all your thought and time and energy to some occupation and nobody seems to take the slightest interest in it, you get discouraged and take small pleasure in feeling intellectually isolated. We hear quite a lot every now and again about the revival of interest in poetry, and yet that comparative increase is very small when one

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"scarcity" in Ashton, "Labor and the Lyric" (2013), 222; "deskilling" in Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (2017), 65; and "self-emptying" in Best, *None Like Us* (2018), 61.

> thinks of the amazing number of perfectly futile novels which are widely reviewed and largely read. (201)

Both the limited attention bestowed on poetry and the satisfaction such isolation affords its devotees are figured in terms of size. Yet rather than answer the question raised by these slights—"Why don't people read poetry?"—Aldington switches his sightlines, tellingly, to the smallness of the poems themselves (201). He repeatedly contrasts the two major verbal arts by measuring the appropriately modern poem against the presumed largeness of the novel ("there was more in six lines of real poetry than in 350 pages of fiction"). He confesses that *vers libre* allows not only the "Hard, direct treatment" afforded by the short lines he prefers but also the "pompous and inflated" verbiage stuffing long Whitmanesque lines. He highlights the dimensions of the book of poetry itself ("this little volume"). He relishes the constraints entailed by the Imagist label when he notes, "It cuts us away from the 'cosmic' crowd. … bars us off from the 'abstract art' gang … and annoys quite a lot of fools" (201). And he is predictably clear in his transhistorical valuation of verbal economy: "All great poetry is exact" (202).

The pinnacle of that virtue for Aldington is H. D. (who was married to him at the time). He cites the initial stanzas of her "Hermes of the Ways" (1913), which opens with "hard sand" breaking into individual "grains" that the wind then piles into "little ridges." Next it describes a "Small … white stream," "small trees," and "Too small" apples. "Hermes of the Ways" does not lack devices ("clear as wine"), archaisms ("awaiteth"), or symbolism (with it images seeming to parallel the processual segmentation and feedback loops entailed in the making or reading of lines, which is to say in observation itself). Rather, it prunes those characteristics down toward an unstated minimum. H. D. presents her poem with limited contextualization ("Verses, Translations, and Reflections from 'The Anthology'") and composes it out of brief stanzas; tight lines, which in their unevenness activate the "blank" space of the page; and words that only rarely reach three syllables. In concert, such reductions read as exactness to early twentieth-century eyes.

Aldington's discussion of Ezra Pound's "Liu Ch'e" (1914), meanwhile, swirls together seemingly every flavor of brevity. He begins by contrasting a Greek epigrammatist and a Victorian novelist. "Far better be Rufinus with his six lines about Rhodokleia," the critic insists, "than Trollope with his fast-being-forgotten novels" (203). Such durable density, in turn, makes Pound's poem eminently pocketable. A few weeks earlier, in what would become a famous nugget of praise, Ford Madox Ford had referred to "Liu Ch'e" as "in reality a tiny novel" (153). For his part, Aldington imagines Ford's description as socialized fact: "I would rather read three poems like that in a week, carry them about with me, read them to my friends, in Kensington Gardens, in restaurants, and so on, than read any three novels you care to mention" (203). If the tone here approaches consumerist insouciance, it is grounded in a vision of the short poem as shared and repeated. The very small work functions as a site of association for friends, spouses, and colleagues—as well as for those reading, rather than "not reading," reviews.

If verbal concision epitomizes certain values (clarity) and conveniences (portability), it also opens one's practice up to new kinds of doubt. Although Aldington finds in smallness an assurance of quality among friends, among his enemies he links it to triviality. Reflecting (in his 1941 memoir) on the Georgian Poets, whose anthologies easily outsold and provided a model for the corresponding collections of Imagist work, Aldington writes, "They took a little trip for a little week-end to a little cottage where they wrote a little poem on a little theme" (100). This jibe parries the perceived threats of triviality and *hyper*-sociality. If Aldington's decidedly masculinist taunt reflects in its denigration of leisure a dose of the work ethic that I will discuss in relation to Pound's "Metro" poem, it speaks overtly to how the social function of shortness—that is, brevity's affordance of circulation—cuts in both directions at once. Whether read as clever or compensatory, Aldington's refrain of diminishment, with its nursery rhyme series of "little" after "little," conveys a distaste for excess of the same sociability he relished envisioning for "this little volume," *Des Imagistes* (1914), containing the work of his peers (203).

We are not, of course, much taken aback by Aldington's use of the same adjective for opposing purposes in different decades.[7] The tensions his usage highlights, however, complicate our most substantial recent scholarly account of how we, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, have read and conceptualized poetry. Keeping his remarks in mind as we turn to that powerful project of historicization will help us appreciate how it raises but then sidelines the tenacious, variegated connections between poetry and brevity.

3. The Persistence of Size in Discussions of Genre

We have a convenient collection: short lines, small images, terse tones, brief poems, little magazines, and slim books subtended by an acceptance of the likelihood of limited readership and more or less restricted circulation, plus the meager pleasures and mild humiliations all these afford. What does the writing that coordinates this range of littles look like? If Aldington's running tab of associations between verse and brevity does not quite capture "All poetry," it would seem to encompass quite a bit more than H. D.'s spare, reflexive language and Pound's severe condensations of narrative. The composite picture it offers is awfully familiar, after all.

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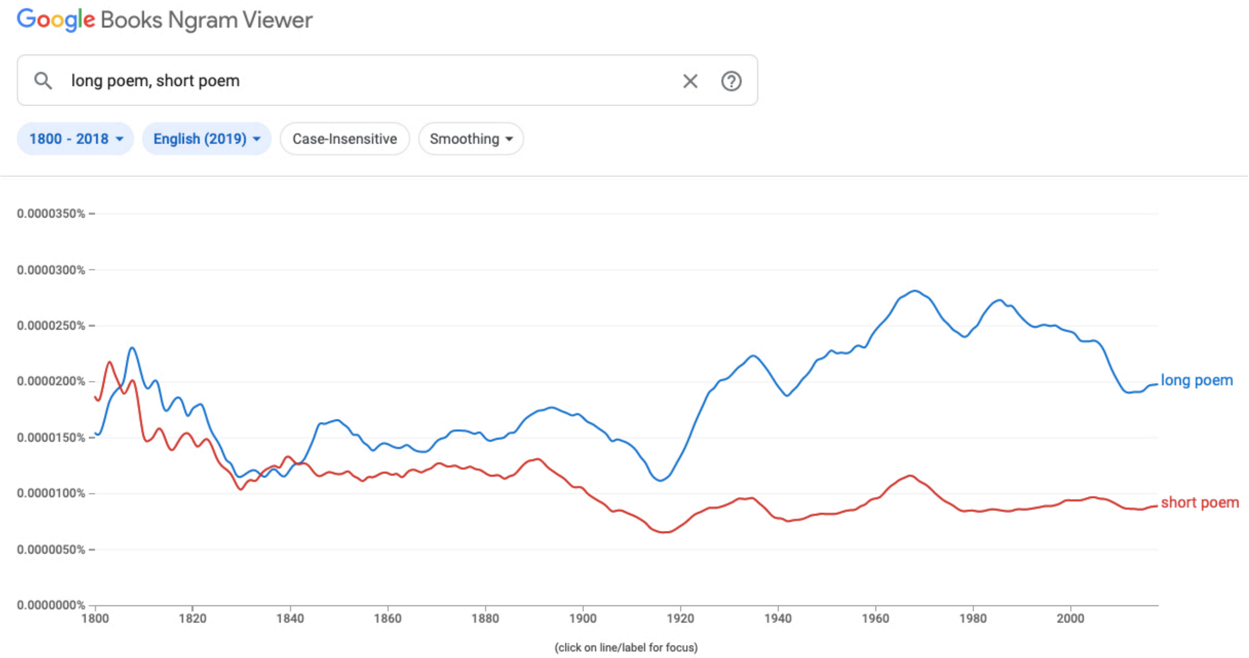
[7] For three distinct ways of framing Aldington's barb, see Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977); Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (1987); and Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde" (2005).

The simple fact that we recognize the “long poem” and the “modernist long poem” as genres—that is, as categories to be distinguished by qualification from the broader category of “poem”—speaks to that familiarity. The fourth edition of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Greene et al. 2012, hereafter PEPP), includes the former in its catalog of “Genres and Forms,” and the previous edition directs our attention to three related entries: “Long Poem. See Epic; Modernist Long Poem; Narrative Poetry” (xxvi). Naturally, neither edition lists “short poem” as a genre. Meanwhile, the phrase “long poem” appears more than fifty times across the two editions; “short poem,” just over a dozen. A pass through Google’s Ngram Viewer confirms this pattern more broadly (see Fig. 1). Since the Romantic era, the phrase “long poem” has consistently been printed more frequently than its graded antonym (which is not to say its conceptual opposite).



long poem, short poem

Fig. 1. “‘long poem’, ‘short poem,’” Google Books Ngram Viewer, 24 Jul. 2020.

Quick-and-dirty corpus linguistics can only tell us so much. But the contrast visualized in Figure 1 fits with our expectations, it is confirmed when we compare plurals. The phrase "short poems," according to the same database of printed English, is quite a bit more common than "long poems," which is precisely what we would expect since we use the former to describe groupings of distinct items ("She just published a book of short poems") and the latter as a taxonomic label describing a shared quality ("She just published an article about the long poem"). It is not incorrect, much less impossible, to use the infrequent types, as in "She published a book of long poems *and* an article about the short poem in the same month!" But the infrequency of those types, not to mention the way the phrase "the short poem" in my last example pleads for quotation marks, reflects our shared reality.

We could fairly wonder if the physical realities of scalar difference are to blame for these disparities. Perhaps there are simply more short or small things than long or large things because it is "easier" to be a small thing in a limited universe? That real frequency might be thought to determine our linguistic usage. Clearly, though, both "novella" and "short story" are well-recognized designators—the latter encompassing further reductions in the form of "short short story," "flash fiction," and "microfiction"—whereas the far rarer phrase "long story," when employed, would tend to serve as a colloquial (and perhaps judgmental) descriptor rather than a generic marker. The novel itself, we know, "is a piece of prose fiction of a reasonable length" (Eagleton 1). Our basic convictions about literary modes and size align quite well with Aldington's rhetorical contrast between Joyce and Trollope, on the one hand, and the six lines or three tiny poems he hopes to carry in hand, on the other. In sum? The phrase "short poem" approaches redundancy.

All this of course elides a relevant and much-debated distinction within the field. The critical category that tends to abrogate the various flavors of smallness is one Aldington does not name explicitly but Philip Fisher (to whom I will turn in a moment) uses quite unselfconsciously when he writes, "Lyric poetry has always, among the arts of time …" (22). The project of historicizing "lyric" as a genre *in* time, initiated by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins roughly two decades ago, represents the most sustained recent challenge to the assumptions undergirding business-as-usual in the field of poetry studies. In a pair of monographs, a series of articles, a key reference entry, and a set of case-making headnotes for the co-edited anthology mentioned previously, Jackson and Prins have articulated and buttressed a thesis about the "lyricization" of poetry.[8] In *The Lyric Theory Reader* (2014, hereafter *Reader*) they write, "In the course of that uneven process [of lyricization], stipulative verse genres that once belonged to neoclassical taxonomies or to certain communities or to specific modes of circulation gradually collapsed into a more and more abstract idea of poetry that then became associated with the lyric" (452). The result of that ongoing process, in this telling, is "an increasingly capacious but highly variable sense of [all] poetry as lyric" (452). The full set of claims put forward in this project is too extensive to do full justice to here, but a few key ideas can be highlighted in order to clarify the nature of the challenges it presents.[9]

Definitions of lyric poetry and the attributes we associate with it—especially expressiveness, interiority, a speaker—are best understood as deriving not from ancient literary categories, features of form, or a consistent set of reading practices, but instead from a series of relatively recent developments in criticism. Two crucial moments stand out. The first occurred during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—with key roles played by Goethe, Hegel, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and J. S. Mill—when the Romantic lyric grew to be defined as the expression of an individual subject. The second took place in the early- and mid-twentieth century when the lyric, and its particular expressivity, came to be identified with a "speaker" (as distinct from both the author and the fictional device of a narrator) as well as with dense, highly wrought language. We can collate the two primary arguments in a manner that acknowledges their difference while indicating something of their interrelation. The core result of the historical process emblematized by the "overextension of the phrase" *lyric* has been the gradual enveloping of multifarious poetic genres (especially those associated with short forms and those most distinct from narrative, dramatic, and epic verse) by a singular, "supersized" understanding of lyric; that understanding, in turn, positions each individual poem as "an idealized moment of expression" (Johnson 460; *Reader* 452; Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery* 7).

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[8] Key installments in this project include Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (1999); Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery* (2005); Jackson and Prins, "Lyrical Studies" (1999); Jackson, "Lyric," PEPP (2012); and Jackson and Prins, eds., *The Lyric Theory Reader* (2014).

[9] Major responses that attempt a comprehensive overview of the lyricization project include Burt, "What Is This Thing Called Lyric?" (2016) and Culler, 83-90. For an illuminating back-and-forth, see Izenberg, *Being Numerous*, 31-35; Jackson, "Please Don't Call It History" (2011); and Izenberg, "Being Numerous: The Defense of History" (2011).

In many ways, the centrality of forms and thematics of shortness or constraint to modern poetry is a condition the scholarship of new lyric studies is well situated to examine. After all, that project emphasizes how critics have encompassed an extraordinarily wide variety of poems under a notion of "lyric" that boils down to just two characteristics: expression and brevity. Whether one accepts the lyricization thesis, in part or in full, *size* is repeatedly imbricated in its debates. As M. H. Abrams has it in the first sentence of his summation of "Lyric" in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1999), "In the most common use of the term, a lyric is any fairly short poem, consisting of the utterance by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought, and feeling" (146). Note how a clear connection subtends all of these aspects except the designator “fairly short.” The opening sentences of Jackson and Prins’s *Reader* replicate this pairing—subjectivity and shortness—by underscoring that readers have used lyric to refer to “an utterance in the first person, an expression of personal feeling” or sometimes to particular poems “simply because they are short” (1). The editors complicate Abrams’s pairing by recognizing “musicality of language by appeal to the ear or to the eye” and “opposition to narrative” as further criteria sometimes used to peg writing as lyric. Those two criteria, however, fall comfortably enough within the scalar framework offered by “fairly short” and “simply … short.” As we will see subsequently, the techniques of musicality and spatialization often converge in their effects of speed, succinctness, and interruption.

For the moment, it may be helpful to slow down and unpack one of the *Reader*’s most telling flourishes. Its last headnote appropriately concludes with a discussion of David Damrosch’s “Love in the Necropolis” (2003), the anthology’s final selection and its “oldest” in terms of its object of attention: “the shortest” of the texts crammed by a scribe onto the “little space left at the end” of an ancient Egyptian papyrus scroll (632). Damrosch finds in that text a “powerful immediacy,” whose “brevity and simplicity” he reads as “a kind of minimum of literary expression.” For the editors, as they make clear in their headnote, this is a quintessential imposition of “lyric reading” made possible by insufficient specification. There is a clear intellectual disagreement between them and the humanist critic of world literature (in the singular). Jackson, in *Dickinson’s Misery*, attends gracefully to the “small details” of Dickinson’s writings and letters, including the poet’s inclusion of material artifacts such as clippings, a pinned leaf, and “insect remnants” in correspondence; in her conclusion, Jackson even suggests that “dead crickets” might be usefully understood as one in a series of “lyric genres” (11, 90, 235). In direct contrast, in his reading of the scribe’s ancient hieroglyphs, which mention a “tunic,” Damrosch insists, “It would add little to our appreciation of the poem to have a pocket insert in our volume with a fabric sample” (640). Though he treats papyrus and scribe as relevant to interpreting the textual “minimum” he examines, Damrosch dismisses the usefulness of exceedingly scrupulous attention to the original circumstances of production and circulation.

The editors seem less than completely convinced. Their final sentence in the *Reader* relents that “the norm” of “the modern lyric” has proven so tenacious and so fruitful that “it is unlikely that we will give it up anytime soon,” and Damrosch’s essay is meant to serve as emblematic of our readiness to transform nearly any poem-like artifact into a modern lyric. It is in that context that I want to call attention the final non-paratextual editorial words of the 670-page anthology. The very end of the last headnote beckons. At its edge, the authors reach for their own high note of “yearning after the condition of lyric” by way of an unmarked allusion to Damrosch’s off-site reference to the sixteenth-century’s “Western Wind” (Tucker 146). They write: “perhaps precisely because so many critics have begun to develop variations on that model [of lyric reading], another wind is blowing, and with it *the small rain down shall rain*” (*Reader* 575, emphasis added). Limit orchestrates this fluid downpour of “lyricism.” Manifesting as endings, anonymities, and little spaces for minima, limitation creates a gravitational pull that induces the effects we read as immediate, intense, or expressive. And that relay between tiny particulates and gaps, on the one hand, and enveloping aggregation, on the other—between small details and singular excess—is neatly conveyed by the repetition *of* and *within* the incorporated phrase itself, as the drops become their own collective action: “the small rain down shall rain.”[10]

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[10] Jackson and Prins’s ominous “shall” revises the verb “can” that is found in the oldest surviving version of the text we now call “Western Wind” and in most modernizations, including the one anthologized by Arthur Quiller-Couch that Damrosch cites in the book of his referenced by the two editors (Frey 259; Damrosch, *How to Read* 9). Charles Olson’s use of a “shall”-version in his 1950 presentation of the text as “the minimum and source of speech” elevated its frequency somewhat (*Collected Prose* 18).

Yet even as it gestures repeatedly toward the centrality of smallness to poetic writing and reading, the work of the new lyric studies pursues a different direction. Over and over, it turns away from brevity in order to point out the crux of expression. Through its lens, we thus discover that our idea of the lyric "assum[es] it to be a form of subjective expression"; "the object that the lyric has become is by now identified with an expressive theory"; and there is "a general sense that the lyric is the genre of personal expression" (Prins 19; Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery* 10; *Reader* 2). The project of historicizing this supergenre trains its formidable sights on one set of issues (speaker, voice, immediacy, subjectivity, the lyric "I," and so forth) in order to reinvigorate debates regarding genre and audience. None of these will be my primary concerns. I aim instead to take seriously the irritating persistence of brevity in all these discussions.

Why? As suggested by my reading of Jackson and Prins's reading of Damrosch, my sense is that the relative smallness or lack of poems labeled "lyric" has likely helped induce *both* the critical practice of lyric reading (whereby the critic discovers expressions of an individual author or speaker) *and* the wide circulation that distances the artifact from its "scene of composition," original audience, and initial contexts (*Reader* 574). Those two phenomena reinforce each other, as Jackson and Prins imply. We can take this one step further: The smallness or lack linked to the concept of "lyric" may have been a key factor animating its ingestion of numerous subgenres and its "overextension" in our critical discussions.[11] As the new lyric studies argues, those two separate tendencies, again reinforcing each other, partly explain how the category has come to seem both quasi-synonymous with poetry *tout court* and a descriptor of "the essence of a poem, a poem at its most poetic" (*Reader* 1).

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[11] Jackson's "Lyric" entry notes this dynamic: "short poems (often called *songs*) flourished in large part [in the 17th c.] precisely because their marginalization as minor lit. in the 16th c. made the stakes of their composition and circulation so low" (828). The centrality of Sappho's *fragment* 31 in Nicolas Boileau's influential translation of Longinus would be another example (828).

Impelled by these speculations, my own project directs critical energy not toward issues of expression or audience but toward the enabling conditions of form-making in relation to historically located "discourses of brevity" in three different cases. If perceptible form is necessarily the result of stopping short by marking distinctions, then poetry stops short*er*—with respect to verbal matter. As we have seen, in the example of lyric's capaciousness as a concept, that condition of smallness can prove quite expansive. Yet, in the twentieth century at least, it reliably distinguishes what goes by the name "poetry" from other major modes of writing: at the level of the text, which is presumed to be smaller in size than the output of other modes; at the level of the line, which is often shorter than its page would allow and whose length is determined by the author rather than by printing conventions; and at the level of content in the poem's aggregation of small details, small streams, small trees, small apples, and small rain. These conventions and associations grow stronger beginning in the late nineteenth century with the emergence of *vers libre* as an authorial option. And they are pressurized in modern poems that make brevity their *raison d'être*. How brevity signifies—in a given moment, for a given author, and in a given text—is an open question. In each of my case studies, different conceptions of brevity mediate between overgeneralization that would proffer a purely formal and transhistorical notion of "the short text" and overspecification that would threaten to delink each poem from its own strange afterlives.

4. Sublyric Reading

My intervention in fact takes its cues from a pair of texts that have been more or less incorporated into Jackson and Prins's critical history. T. S. Eliot's "The Three Voices of Poetry" (1953) has become a touchstone for the new lyric studies, as evidenced by the sizable excerpts included in both the corresponding headnote in the *Reader* (which anthologizes the piece) and Jackson's "Lyric" entry for the PEPP. It is not difficult to see why when we revisit one of those excerpts (the entirety of which comes from Eliot's original essay):

> The very definition of "lyric", in the Oxford Dictionary, indicates that the word cannot be satisfactorily defined:
>
> > *Lyric*: Now the name for short poems, usually divided into stanzas or strophes, and directly expressing the poet's own thoughts and sentiments.
>
> How short does a poem have to be, to be called a "lyric"? The emphasis on brevity, and the suggestion of division into stanzas, seem residual from the association of the voice with music. But there is no necessary relation between brevity and the expression of the poet's own thoughts and feelings. …
>
> It is obviously the lyric in the sense of a poem "directly expressing the poet's own thoughts and sentiments," not in the quite unrelated sense of a short poem intended to be set to music, that is relevant to my first voice—the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody. (197)

Eliot's engagement with lyric is revealing in two ways. First, he dismisses out of hand any connection between brevity and the turn to "expression," calling the pair "quite unrelated." Resisting that quick dissociation, we can remind ourselves that compression is one means of generating the intensity we register when we call a text "expressive." For a work to read as especially so, brevity is nearly a requirement: intensity cannot be protracted. Returning to my "pressure" metaphor, if "venting" describes a theoretically continuous stream or deluge of language, thought, or emotion, expression (or "pressing out," etymologically) is the punctuated alternative.[12] If in daily life such punctuations are understood to be determined by the limitations of experience or circumstance (as in "Hey you!" or "Ouch!"), in the verbal arts they are manufactured by way of technique. With respect to the intentional making of poems, brevity thus entails "expression" not in the sense of the immediate enunciations of an authorial subject or an individual speaker, or in the sense of the more or less misguided "lyric reading" imposed by a critic after perceiving a certain intensity, but in the sense of language delimited to the extent that it approaches the status of being *an expression*: a set phrase, cliché, idiom, saying, or equation. The three poems I will discuss—"In a Station of the Metro," "We Real Cool," and "lighght"—flirt with transforming into just such "expressions," both in their forms and in their episodes of reception.

Second, Eliot explains the "emphasis on brevity" in the dictionary definition of "lyric" as a residue of a relatively uncomplicated link between poetry and song. In an effort to distinguish the properly poetic "first voice" from what he derides in his preceding paragraph as "the latest 'musical number,'" brevity itself must be disposed of as a relevant criterion (197). Certainly, his pointed question—"How short does a poem have to be, to be called a 'lyric'?"—comes close to raising the even more general and quite reasonable objection that seems to be on the tip of his tongue: "How short is short?" One takes Eliot's point that brevity is necessarily relative, but we can suggest heuristic definitions without too much ado. For example, any poem that can reasonably fit on a single page using normative printing conventions might be considered "short" inasmuch as it be can be read without the interruption of page-turning and can perhaps be surveilled as a visual whole. Alternatively, we might take any poem of fewer lines than a standard sonnet, arguably the most durable fixed form in Western poetry, to qualify as short. In any case, brevity's status as a relative designation and an umbrella term encompassing a range of abstractions and practices (e.g., economy, smallness, compression, excision) does not by any means make the idea of brief texts or "short poems" irrelevant. It makes it interesting. If anything, it calls into question the presumed simplicity of the relationship between brevity and song as they pertain to poetry.

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[12] For a different reply to the fact that "A less fashionable concept [than expression] for late twentieth-century European thought, would … be hard to find," see Brian Massumi, "Like a Thought," *A Shock to Thought: Expression After Deleuze and Guattari* (2002), 1. According to Massumi, Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize expression as "always fundamentally of a *relation*, not a subject" (18). If that definition pertains within their philosophy of differential ontology, where a central concern then becomes distinguishing "atypical expressions," it also spotlights the way "expression" frequently functions as an empty signifier within discussions of lyric, whether it is analyzed as a complex virtue, criticized as rationalist, or historicized as a readerly imposition (14).

Like "The Three Voices," a pair of essays from the 1990s by Mark Jeffreys (referenced in both *Dickinson's Misery* and the *Reader*, though not anthologized in the latter) prefigures certain aspects of the new lyric studies. In contrast to Eliot, however, Jeffreys directly advocates for shortness as a critical frame. "Whether lyric is held in high or low esteem," he notes in "Songs and Inscriptions: Brevity and the Idea of Lyric" (1994), "the model of lyric as small poem remains constant" (133-34n13). In surveying the critics who address this topic, he concludes, "Whenever the issue of the relatively short length of lyric poems has been brought up, it has almost always been immediately set aside" (118). The rationale for that ostensible setting aside that Jeffreys finds in those critics inevitably resembles the one put forward by Eliot, yet those same critics then proceed "to make assertions that lean heavily upon the 'fact' that lyrics are short" (118). Jeffreys himself takes up the case by sketching an "intermingling of the smaller literary forms in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly of the epigram, the emblem, the song lyric, and the sonnet" (118). His rough genealogy of the "vague supergenre" of lyric grounded in the Renaissance is fascinating in and of itself, but I am most interested in where his argument goes next (123):

> Perhaps the characteristic of *brevity is an active generic force not a passive distinction*, and continues to cause so much confusion and intertextual exchange between what are really two distinct kinds of literary activity that it remains difficult to distinguish them despite all their differences in origin, history, audience, practice, and cultural status. For that to be true, we would have to assume first that it is possible that *the awareness of a need to be brief can have similar results in authors composing texts for utterly different purposes, audiences, and so forth*. (128, emphasis added)

Jeffreys judges his own assumption to be serviceable rather than "reckless," and then states simply, "The act of composing a text that intends to mean a great deal within a predetermined length (or in as few words as possible) … is merely an intensification of the same process that produces language" (128). This frames language as a necessary reduction of the complexity of that which its author aims to represent, communicate, or touch upon (even as any given text will, necessarily, generate new complexities of its own). Tweaking Jeffreys's phrasing—itself influenced by C. Day-Lewis's 1965 distinction between "the lyric of the folk and the lyric of the few"—we can gloss his "two distinct kinds of literary activity" as "songs for the folk" and "inscriptions for the few," with the latter referring to involuted approaches to writing that are heavily invested in the visual or material qualities of language associated, in Jeffrey's account, with the epigram and the emblem (7-8). Again, I am less concerned with the accuracy of these speculations than with the vantage they provide on the field. Viewing, first, poets in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as exploiting the overlap—compression—between two different strains of verbal practice and, second, that point of overlap as fundamental to language itself opens up certain possibilities.

Following these cues, I duck the "subjective expression" half of the lyric imperative in order to attend to what occurs when the cultural practice most frequently and seriously engaged with verbal economy is taken, by its twentieth-century practitioners, to relative extremes in terms of line, word, and character counts. Such extremes compel a set of what we could call "sublyric" reading practices. My term is indebted to Anthony Reed's chapter on "postlyric poetics," which he describes as designating "not … a new genre but … the use of received understandings of the lyric as a horizon of hermeneutic expectation, only to disrupt the very basis of that mode: the assumed solidity of the speaking, universal 'I'" (98). If the postlyric disruptions in the works Reed focuses on by Claudia Rankine and Douglas Kearney often revolve around "presenting a voice suspended between 'I' and 'we,' centered and diffuse at once," the poems I discuss employ their own set of sublyric strategies out of a comparative disinterest in the regime of expression (97). They ask to be read as taking place outside, before, or underneath the moment when the individual speaker rises to the level of attention. Rather than courting and undermining ideas about "the assumed solidity" of a voice or subject, the three major-minor poems I discuss slip beneath the radar of lyric reading. Through sheer absence, and through the ease of iteration and the attendant context collapse their smallness affords, they *might* foster precisely the reading practices whose dominance Jackson and Prins describe. But their gaps are severe enough that rather than rushing to fill them—with ideas about expression or practices of contextualization—we are forced to register them *as* gaps, defiantly intended. In doing so, such poems offer different accounts of what reduction "reveals" while affirming Jeffreys's hunch that brevity is "an active generic force." That is, the technical decisions related to writing briefly have, in these three cases, if not "similar" then definitively interrelated "results," despite being written by authors otherwise only infrequently read alongside one another.

5. Toward a Theory of the Very Short Poem

Where does sublyric reading take place? If brevity can be said to "pressurize" a text, what generates that intensity? And how fine can our optic be? How short is too short? Philip Fisher poses a version of these queries—his "question of the limits of the tiny event"—in the language of aesthetic philosophy: "How small can a detail be and still be sensuous?" (162). His elaborations on that conundrum revolve around the viewer's affective and intellectual engagements with *visual* rather than verbal art. In fact, although Fisher began his career as a scholar of nineteenth-century fiction, his *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (1998) clearly positions "the temporal arts"—music, dance, and literature (most especially "the narrative arts")—as resistant to wonder because they "depend on controlled expectation," which restricts their ability to induce "the unexpected and the sudden" (21). Though intrigued by these claims, I am more interested in how they unfold. Somewhat unexpectedly, that unfolding reveals ways to conceptualize the abstract space inhabited by very short poems. Following the texture of Fisher's argument will allow us, that is, to delineate the pressurized word-space in which the paradoxes I sketched previously play out. *Wonder* presents a bridge between poetic history and poetic theory almost without attempting to do so, as if its author had arrived at the bridge by accident while attempting avoid the literary arts, as if thinking through the limits of the aesthetic particulate had brought him there unannounced.

The examples of tiny events Fisher offers in a section of his book entitled "The Work of Art as a Field of Details" are variable but bounded. They range from the materialized artistic techniques of "a line, a dab of paint, a splash, a splatter, a scribble, a scratch, a mark"; to moments of change and "surge[s] of pleasure" within a larger arena, such as "the entry of the flute in a symphony," "the first bite into an unexpectedly perfect summer peach," or "a gesture of great delicacy seen across a room"; and on to more abstract "small-scale events," "subcanvases," and "smaller fields of action" (160-62). The experiential criterion for adjudicating just how small such units can be ("and still be sensuous") hints at the ostensibly neutral edges of perception itself, where aesthetics gives way to physiology. But Fisher's focus is less that boundary than the one between mere "irritation" and enticement, and he is confident that such a distinction exists (162). "Sensuality does require a certain scale," he states. "The tiny is not sensual." If that phrasing shifts the scale of attention incrementally upward from the "sensuous" to the "sensual," and blurs the meaning of "tiny," it hardly allows for the aesthetic potential of the infinitely small.

This makes good sense within the architecture of *Wonder*. Wondrous experience for Fisher takes place precisely in the "middle zone" most amenable to the Kantian interplay of imagination and understanding (180). It entails both an initial, sudden inducement (of pleasure) and a prolonged, step-by-by process of figuring-out (associated with knowledge). Unsurprisingly, then, our wonderer turns out to be more interested in the edge of that relatively conventional notion of aesthetic experience than he is in absolute frontiers. In other words, he locates and highlights *the small piece that can nevertheless be experienced almost as if it were a whole*. Meanwhile, he leaves the lower bound of the aesthetic particle ("How small …?") safely unspecified. From this perspective, Fisher's decision to orient his engagement with art around the painter Cy Twombly makes sense as well. Twombly's "incomplete abstractionism" remains securely within the domain of wonder (Jacobus 5).

One way to frame this is to see Fisher as intentionally avoiding the *complete* abstractionism of certain artistic extremes. In the American context, discussions of such extremes orbit Clement Greenberg's notion of modern art's "self-critical tendency" as it explores "[t]he limitations that constitute the medium of painting" (85-86). Midway through a synthesis of those debates, J. M. Bernstein pauses to ask, "Is there anything in music or literature like the monochrome in being so identifiable an *end* (it is, after all, the telos of the process of negations) and exhausted limit (no further negation is left)?" (91). As that question highlights, the story of visual art has more than occasionally been told by way of its limit cases, but critics have been less inclined to survey literature via its corresponding examples: Laurence Sterne's blank page in *Tristram Shandy* (1759); Stéphane Mallarmé's *la poésie pure* (a term coined by Henri Brémond in 1925); James Joyce's oversized punctuation at the end of the "Ithaca" (1922); George Oppen's mid-career silence; and so forth.[13] The poet-critic Craig Dworkin chides poets and their critics for forgetting just such experiments, and in *No Medium* (2013) he arrays a thrilling collection of examples, literary and otherwise, with particular attention to the European avant-gardes. In the poetic domain he describes, for instance, Visilik Gnedov's 1913 no-word poem, which was published under the title "Поэма конца" ("Poem of the End") in a collection, *Смерть Искусству* (*Death to Art*), that also included a pair of single-letter poems (27). Elsewhere he describes, at greater length, Aram Saroyan's "blank book," a standard 500-page ream of paper published with only the author's name, year, press, and price affixed to the wrapper (12-18). Dworkin's readings are unusually incisive, but they do converge toward a single truth: "Erasures obliterate, but they also reveal" (9). And what they reveal is the plurality of media, which are "always necessarily multiple" (28).

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[13] Bernstein's nodes include Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), Alexander Rodchenko's primary colors triptych (1921), and Frank Stella's set of black-stripe paintings (1959).

This line of thought, whether tending toward Greenberg's "medium" or Dworkin's "media," defines a lower bound of artistic reduction. Meanwhile, Fisher's quite different inquiry tends toward something like an opposing *upper* bound. Here, I want to highlight one aspect of Fisher's approach: Even while attending to painting, he designates that upper bound by reference to literature. More specifically, his attention to "individual components" brings him up against not matter or media but poetry (Jacobus 63). Describing Twombly's *Il Parnasso* (1964), Fisher refers back to his own lists of tiny events (i.e., the "gesture of great delicacy seen across a room") and writes, "The painting makes short, impulsive traces that are as brief in space as these events are in time" (160). As Mary Jacobus notes, the units of painterly meaning Fisher proceeds to discover in *Il Parnasso* are "analogous to letter, word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph in a literary text, as each individual episode or subcanvas builds on another to create an intelligible syntax" (64). What those writing-like units are *not*, however, is made quite clear. Fisher insists that Twombly's "traces" (i.e., the small abstract marks that make up *Il Parnasso*) "depict a realm of events lower in scale than the brief or transient things that Keats or Shakespeare thought transient—a flower, a spring, a beautiful youth whose perfection five or ten years will take away" (160).[14] Poetry is by these lights a "temporal art" attached to themes and timescales that are not short enough to be tiny.

That assertion, which places poetry outside the realm of extreme brevity, is based on imputing mid-sized lyric content to particular English poets, and there are good reasons to query it.[15] Yet the idea of an upper limit to the “realm of events lower in scale,” in and of itself, is a useful as a gauge of intensity. For one thing, it allows us to take measure of what is happening in Fisher’s logic and language in this passage itself. As he shifts his attention from the technical features of Twombly’s art (the markings on the canvas) to generalizations about absent examples, he scopes out to increasingly *longer* lifespans: from flower to season to human, rather than the reverse. That is, he avoids the narrowing of frame that would test the logic of his assertion. Meanwhile, his writing grows slack (“transient things … thought transient”) in comparison to the passages cited earlier (which set an admirably high bar for academic writing). In those far tighter sentences, which zero in on discrete elements, Fisher’s language is imbued with precisely the surges of pleasure and minute delights—

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[14] Fisher also refers to Keats and Shakespeare when looking at Twombly's *Untitled* (1970). The later painting is in the artist's "blackboard" style and thus less differentiated than *Il Parnasso*, so Fisher's reference is meant to *link* it to "the traditional theme" of "the lastingness of art in spite of or even because of its [transient] subject" (158).

a líne, a dà̲b of páint, a *sp*lá̲sh, a *sp*lá̲tter
a *sc*ríbble, a *sc*rá̲tch, a márk

—that pull one along through larger compositions of argument or paint.[16] Thinking incrementally seems to pressurize the language being used to express thought. The slacker moments in Fisher’s language (such as the one targeted above by my needling quibbles) may raise questions about his criteria for selecting evidence, but they are definitively *not* problems with his argument; they enact it.

In fact, Fisher himself offers a quite different account of poetry when he examines specific poetic excerpts earlier in *Wonder*. “Lyric poetry has always, among the arts of time, had uniquely potent means to reach out for the effects of wonder that are more at home in the visual," he writes. "Modern poetry since Mallarmé has weakened the part played by grammar and syntax and crossed a critical threshold in the use—one after another—of unexpected words and references until expectation itself ceases to work" (23). This upsetting of syntactical expectations may strike many readers as "annoying obscurity," but in the right context "the experience of wonder can take over." Here Fisher identifies a distinct, if familiar, rupture in the late-nineteenth century that explains poetry's renewed engagement with the aesthetics of the unexpected: its shift toward disjunction, language-as-such, and manipulations of page-space.

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[15] If, for example, the first-person speaker of Keats’s “Ode on Melancholy” (1820) personifies and expounds on a subject that surely outlasts any given lifespan, his closing description of “Veiled Melancholy” hinges on the prospect of garnering a sudden glimpse of her, itself figured as a surge of pleasure entwined with pain. She can be “seen of none,” famously, “save him whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine” (349). That self-inflicted micro-wound would seem to be (if not read exclusively as sexual innuendo) at least as circumscribed as the “first sip of unexpectedly cold wine” Fisher includes among his examples (160).

[16] My marks denote assonance, consonance, and stress. On my approach to scansion, see Chapter 1.

Crucially, though, astonishment can be achieved in poetry by means other than the condensed or broken grammars, visuality, and textual materiality distinct to "modern poetry." Fisher does begin with Mallarmé and a much-cited, tightly whorled passage from Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1941).[17] But he quickly introduces a caveat: "It is not only the obscurity of modern poetry" that can affect the "crowding that is a condition of wonder" (24). The "simple lines" of a funeral song from *Cymbeline* (1611), for example, "can show how poetry brings together the effects of surprise, suddenness, and the moment of wonder." Fisher then presents "Golden lads and girls all must, / As chimney-sweepers, come to dust" without elaboration, but we can note that Shakespeare's speedy tetrameter couplet congeals class, gender, and lifespan in the particulate image of "dust," here both a symbol of mortality and a literal and dangerous fact-of-work for sweepers.

Without confining ourselves to "wonder" or even necessarily assenting to Fisher's particular readings, we can grasp the power of his formulation of poetry pushed almost but not quite to it limits. For him, the lyric poem inhabits the Goldilocks zone of the human while wondrous or “poetic” language (in Roman Jakobson’s sense) is best conceptualized as existing in a space “lower in scale.” Its effects can be engineered through both attenuation of syntax and sing-songy suddenness. Fisher thus, like Jeffreys, highlights a relay between the brevity of reduction and the brevity of speed, between Eliot’s “Clot” and Eliot’s “Sing.” Shortness is both what sutures modern poetry to its lineage, by way of music, and what challenges that filiation by way of “spatial” crowding. Furthermore, the sub-middle zone in which these effects are most prominent is notably *below* the cutoff Fisher glosses as “the brief or transient things Keats and Shakespeare thought transient” but *above* the arena of “quite literal examples of illegibility,” erasure, and blankness that Dworkin traverses (*Reading the Illegible* xxiii). This low-but-not-lowest realm is that of the other Shakespeare, he of the funeral song. It is perhaps that of any excerpt whose density elicits excerption: the “condensed phrase” that attracted Twombly throughout his career, Eliot’s garlic and sapphires, H. D.’s “little ridges,” Damrosch and Jackson and Prins’s “small rain … can rain,” Fisher’s own “a line, a dab…”[18] It is unmistakably the realm of my three central examples to follow.

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[17] Eliot: "Garlic and sapphires in the mud / Clot the bedded axle-tree / The trilling wire in the blood / Sings below inveterate scars" (*Collected Poems* 176-77).

How do texts behave in this realm? As a tentative answer, I would like to revisit the two major problems of brevity I sketched at the outset but this time in a more structuralist idiom.

The shortness of the very short work of art facilitates its repetitions in the external world *while* pressurizing the work’s internal dynamics. Internally, a tight scalar relationship obtains between the small poem’s parts and its whole. Any given piece, with the letter or punctuation mark as the minimum normative unit, necessarily constitutes a larger proportion of the poem as it shrinks.[19] The poem's variable articulations of part-and-whole are therefore unusually fraught. If the parts of any work of art tend to both strain and re-articulate the whole they form and in which they are suspended, that dynamic relation itself is accentuated in very short works.

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[18] Twombly, not only a career-long explorer of the small or liminal mark but also a career-long excerpter of poems as part of his painterly practice, was openly committed to this particulate vision of poetics: “I like poets because I can find a condensed phrase. … I always look for the phrase” (Serota 50).

Simultaneously, this comprehensive circumstance complicates the poem's production, circulation, and reception; the potential import of each decision and every last mark increases for both maker and reader, and in enabling the poem's uptake (as a whole) brevity also facilitates the collapse of context and the additional complications that collapse entails. Under these conditions, both sets of relations—part to whole, whole to "world"—are strained. The articulations of part-and-whole within the work may be said to correspond to the work's tenuous couplings to the times and spaces through which it circulates, with the latter echoing in inverted proportion the strikingness of the former (if not necessarily resembling their structure). The very short work is unique inasmuch as its size, as it approaches Fisher's hypothetical asymptote, makes conspicuous both levels of relation and, more obscurely, their relation to one another.

Jonathan Culler concludes his *Theory of the Lyric* (2015) in praise of the "the sonorous phrase, the memorable formulation … all sorts of phrases, especially unimaginable ones, which stretch the imagination" (353). Culler's language smooths over the irritation that evidences and retains the tenuous articulation between such phrases and the larger composites in which they manifest. Still, it captures the idea of the part that re-articulates the whole as a complex registration of the confrontation of between form and history, between work and world. In quite different ways, the trajectories of "Metro," "Cool," and "lighght" describe what happens when the poem itself, as a whole, approaches the status of the floating semi-sonorous phrase. The very short poem is the work of art as a compounding of field and detail. It is thus an ideal site for scrutinizing a form's making in and traversal of history.

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[19] One example would be the vacillation between colon and semicolon in the early versions of "Metro." Though an exceedingly small typographical shift (from ":" to ";"), it is one that the critical literature has read as substantially remaking the poem. In the short genre of the text message, meanwhile, that same toggling represents a quite different shift in tone, from friendly to flirtatious.

6. Our Minima

Over the last five years, no fewer than three monographs have appeared that focus on the "life" of a single short poem: David Orr's *The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong* (2016), Ian Sansom's *September 1, 1939: A Biography of a Poem* (2019), and Peter Murphy's *The Long Public Life of a Short Private Poem: Reading and Remembering Thomas Wyatt* (2019). Without attempting the comprehensiveness of these treatments, much less the temporal scope of Murphy's bar-setting study, my discussion of three distinct very short poems begins from the premise that they are irrevocably "ours" to the extent that each has led a surprisingly varied and vigorous public life.

In all three cases, those "social lives" began almost at the moment of making and have continued on to the present day (Cohen 104). Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," Brooks's "We Real Cool," and Saroyan's "lighght" each attracted early positive and negative attention from reviewers. All three have since been reprinted and anthologized regularly. And they have circulated even more widely off the page. Saroyan's first two books were read aloud on the NBC Evening News by anchor Edwin Newman in 1968, and one poem from the first of those books, the seven-character piece on which I will focus, found its way to the floors of the U.S. government just a few years later, beginning its decades-long role in congressional debates over funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. Brooks's short poem likewise took on a number of roles, appearing as a Black Arts Movement broadside in the late 1960s; on subways as part of the Poetry in Motion campaign in the 1990s; on video as part of the Favorite Poem

Project in 2014; and on film just recently in *Southside with You* (2016), where a fictionalized young Barack Obama recites the poem from memory and his date, Michelle Robinson, harmonizes with him for the poem's final, seemingly most elegiac and certainly most challenging, line. If Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" has had less interaction with the White House and Senate, it has bequeathed both its parts and its whole to scores of other works of art; sparked numerous literary rejoinders, from Miłosz's two-paragraph "Esse" (1954, 1988) to John Murillo's two-line "At the Metro" (2010); and served as a stand-in for the literary work as such in sophisticated discussions of critical method.[20]

If the foregoing speaks to the flirtatious "social lives" and pressurized theoretical potency of very small and very made verbal objects, what links each of them not to the others (via broad considerations of form) but to history? What of those "times and spaces" mentioned toward the end of the previous section, in my structuralist interlude? The particular kind of textual biography I referenced above had until quite recently been restricted to major long poems, sequences, or novels. That genre's "one-downmanship" over the last five years to the scale of the "short private poem" entails a methodological peculiarity that speaks to contextualization.[21] Focusing on such objects entails entering the economized verbal space "above" the blank or illegible and yet "beneath" the individual subject, and a text exploring that space can certainly be understood as enduringly minute in terms of "the hardest bits, the words themselves and the tiny structure of meaning they can create within their elegant and now outmoded box" (Murphy 37). But crucially that endurance derives in part from the author's particular engagements with smallness itself; very short poems compact era-specific notions of the small in ways that offer friction against the turnings of time, use, and critical perspective.

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[20] In "Form and Explanation" (2017), Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian write, "Understood as shape, form then explains the existence of mid-size composites whose examples might include the Farnese Hercules, Lake Michigan, 'In a Station of the Metro,' the Triborough Bridge, or a hepatocyte" (657). Their sentence is meant to underscore Sandra MacPherson's erasure of the distinction between intentionally "manufactured" objects and "natural" ones in her "A Little Formalism" (2013), but it also covertly queries what exactly a *sub*-mid-sized literary composite would look like if not "Metro" (657). It may be worth risking fussiness to note, additionally, that the only other specified literary examples across the six entries in the "form and explanation" debates are likewise short poems: "William Shakespeare's sonnet 55" (1609), which Marjorie Levinson mentions, and Wallace Stevens's twelve-line "Anecdote of the Jar" (1919), which Tom Eyers interprets to nice effect (153; 142).

[21] Mark Seltzer, *The Official World*, 166. Seltzer's crisp description of the "the incrementalist turn across a range of literary and cultural studies … toward the minor and the scaled-down" is relevant here, though the selection of a single very small object for sustained critical attention perhaps more resembles the older, blunter microcosmicism of those popular histories that use a single commodity to tell a story of "the world" (165-66).

Poems, that is, often seem beat us to the punch by operating incrementally on notions of increment. Consider Wyatt's "delicate shadings, slight verbal movements of meaning and sound, and carefully delineated psychology" as determined by the ever-precarious relations at court (Murphy 16). Consider, coming a few generations later, John Donne's "airy thinness" and flea-scale conceits in an era of educational regimentation and the development of the modern microscope (Stubbs 6-7). In our own moment, consider the potential and actual distributions in time and space of Christian Bök's genomic sonnets and Rupi Kaur's best-selling posts. And consider Ada Limón's much-shared "The End of Poetry" (2020), with its refrain of "enough," its rapid accrual of enoughness that cuts off with a minimal demand for contact in the poem's only foreshortened line: "I am asking you to touch me." Limón's tiny structure deploys a widely shared abstract idea of poetry as overmuchness wrought by way of verbal limitation, and it does so in order to partake of the current language of social distancing and behavioral restriction.

The three poems I examine are "*our* minima," then, not only in their ongoing publicness but also in their indexing of specific discourses of brevity from different moments in the last century. They provide opportunities to calibrate at least two of the smallnesses that inform their respective experiments in verbal economics—one poetic and one more broadly social—against each another. In a 1926 music review, Pound characterizes George Antheil's third violin sonata as a composition that "thinks on time's razor edge":

> This is not a simple question of playing "in time" or even "in time with each other."
>
> It means that, via Stravinsky and Antheil and possibly one other composer, we are brought to a closer conception of time, to a faster beat, to a closer realisation or, shall we say, "decomposition" of the musical atom.
>
> The mind, even the musician's mind, is conditioned by contemporary things, *our minimum*, in a time when the old atom is "bombarded" by electricity, when chemical atoms and elements are more strictly considered, is no longer the minimum of the sixteenth century pre-chemists. (*EP and Music* 316, emphasis added)

Here I am less concerned with the scientism of Pound's statements than I am in his broader point that the "minimum" of a given practice (music, chemistry, or otherwise) is historically conditioned.[22] By demonstrating how a poem's commitment to brevity is mediated by—that is, manifests through and clashes with—a specific contemporaneous notion of reduction, I attempt to gauge three quite different poetic increments: Pound's cut, Brooks's catch, Saroyan's error or slack. To do so, I provide an account of how each author's most famous poem engages directly and indirectly with the contexts most pertinent to its making. The first chapter is the most concerned with a "thick" version of such contextualization, both because it is the furthest removed from our present moment and because the questions it raises continue to be relevant in the subsequent chapters. In all three cases, in order to provide a new interpretation of an overly familiar text, I triangulate (1) production-side literary analysis that accounts for certain early poems and technical developments and includes a reading of the author's anecdote about the origin of their most famous piece; (2) an argument about how those poems, techniques, and anecdotes interact with a mediating discourse of limitation; and (3) a discussion of the afterlife of the very short poem "itself." My hope is that the following chapters, summarized below, allow us to recognize the shared concerns of three key twentieth-century American authors whose works are only occasionally read alongside one another.

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[22] Both Fisher's experiential limit and Pound's "our minimum" are likely indebted to the Aristotelian concept of "natural minima," on which see Alan Chalmers, *The Scientist's Atom and the Philosopher's Stone* (2009), 76-78.

Metro

I position "In a Station of the Metro" and the Imagist emphasis on excision in relation to the emerging "stylistic norms of information genres" that were being formalized in the world of business management and leaking into the public sphere around the turn of the century (Guillory 122). If the Imagists looked (through a distorted lens) to ancient Greece and East Asia as resources for ideas about concision, the compulsion to do so—the reason "brevity and clarity" was felt to be a command—came from a broader cultural emphasis on "the communicational motive" of transmission as opposed to the rhetorical one of persuasion or the philosophical one of truth (Guillory 125, 120). That pressure to reduce, in turn, inserted a central conflict at the core of Ezra Pound's early work. His adherence to what I term "the modernist work ethic" places him in a bind with respect to brevity. He accepts it as an imperative but in obeying that imperative risks eliminating the evidence of his labors. To put this a bit differently, if it is notoriously difficult to gauge how much work (in terms of time, effort, and skill) went into the production of a given object, that difficulty is heightened in the case of intellectual work; moreover, an accepted norm for adjudicating specifically poetic work—versification—was radically destabilized around 1900. These problems of production are exacerbated when underwritten by the directive of brevity. Pound's felt need to demonstrate the "real work" of making thus requires him to manufacture proof-of-work in the form of both anecdotes and technical innovations, including a cutting rhythm that connotes physicality (*Selected Letters* 8, hereafter SL).

To grasp the work-ethical side of these tensions, recall that in the modernity Max Weber describes it is not only the "predestined Christian" but each and every individual who "must constantly endeavor to gain self-confidence afresh in restless and successful labor in his calling" (93-94). Kathi Weeks has recently synthesized the remarkable endurance of that mentality, and Pound's sense of himself as the predestined artist conveys the force that the "extraordinarily persistent" valorization of hard work carries in the domain of aesthetics: "I knew at fifteen pretty much what I wanted to do," he writes two months after publishing "Metro" (Weeks 82; "How I Began" 707). "I resolved that at thirty I would know more about poetry than any man living."[23] To make sense of the modernist side of that commitment, I emphasize the attenuation of distinctions within "the world of work" as more and more kinds of labor, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, come to center on the manipulation of symbols (Mills 229). My thinking here is informed by Mark McGurl's reading of the modernist American novel. Reframing Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), in which "the avoidance of dishonorable productive labor" is "signified by conspicuous consumption and aesthetic waste," McGurl argues that "a completer account of twentieth-century consumer culture—one that pays adequate due to the obvious persistence of the other, 'Protestant ethic' half of the deal—should supplement

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[23] Moving from Pound to Brooks (1917-2000) and then Saroyan (b. 1943), we might detect a trajectory of intentional, critical attenuation of the ties between poetic value and exacting labor. Yet all three had early exposure to writing as a serious and lifelong pursuit. Brooks recounts herself, at seven years old, presenting her mother with a "page of rhymes" and being told, "You're going to be the lady Paul Laurence Dunbar!" (*Report from Part Two* 11). Saroyan, meanwhile, was well aware as a youth that his father William (who was the child of Armenian immigrants, published his debut during the Great Depression, and was offered the Pulitzer Prize three years before Aram's birth) was a famous and famously productive author (*Last Rites* 5-22).

Veblen's 'conspicuous consumption' with its terminological inversion, *inconspicuous production*—the mental labor of the mindworker" (17-18).

When we consider American poetry in this same context, it is the further terminological inversion of *conspicuous production* that is most salient. Pound's example is exemplary precisely to the extent that his poems strive to distinguish themselves not only from his prose, which he perceives as instrumental, or from "the novel," which pursues a trajectory far less bound up with reduction or "cutting," but from the wider world of symbol-based work that mediates his poetry's privileging of brevity. That Pound's efforts inevitably exist amid the flurry of "inconspicuous production" by an incipient professional-managerial class composed of those whom Pound's poems castigate as "practical people" impels his language to make itself visible to counter the "crisis" or threat of indistinction ("Contemporania" 8; McGurl 4). "Metro," both in its formal oscillations between 1913 and 1916 and its afterlives, is the crucible in which I observe these conflicts and the resultant emergence of textual materiality play out.

Cool

Turning away from a decidedly modernist transatlantic milieu and to the American Midwest in the post-World War II era, I next examine Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool." If Pound's poem condenses the problems of production generated by a commitment to concision, Brooks's engages the pressurization of the paradoxes of circulation that occur in the context of cramped spaces and constrained opportunities. When Brooks writes, "Shortness for me is part of the solution," she is speaking to her dual commitment to modernist principles, on the one hand, and a partly populist ethic, on the other (Fuller et al. 69). In her work, brevity is the formal domain in which those two traditions overlap in the most intricate ways. Yet pursuing the charms of the singular line or phrase in a thoroughly mediated culture necessarily aggravates the most general problem of circulation, to which one of Brooks's interlocutors refers when she sympathizes, "That's the problem with a poem isn't it? Once you let go of it, you have no control on how people interpret it?" (Presson 133).

If simply shrinking the poem increases the potency of that paradox—by increasing the likelihood that it will be "caught" up and reiterated in its entirety—"We Real Cool" engages with that formal problem in a historically and geographically specific arena of highly circumscribed circulation: the predominantly Black neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side in midcentury America. The sociologically inflected discourses of limitation that mediate the relationship between those worlds and "We Real Cool" include both the emerging language of health disparity and the widely publicized disputes surrounding school segregation and overcrowding, which led to the Freedom Day walkout in 1963 when over 220,000 students "left school" in protest.[24] These contexts inform without determining the range of meanings "shortness" carries in the work Brooks published between 1945 and 1960.

The infrastructural imagination at work in her poems engages those variable meanings at every turn.[25] Line length serves as one means of formally calibrating the variable *thematics of shortness or constraint* on display in the poems. It adjusts to the shifting specifics of Brooks's characters and speakers—those "occupants of a common street" who appear devoid of the

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[24] Ewing, 80-81. Though Ewing does not explicitly connect Brooks's poem to the dynamics that led to Freedom Day in October 1963 and its sequel in June 1965, she has it in mind. "We Real Cool" epigraphs her book's introduction, and she explains, "In the hazy cataloging of my literary mind, 'We real cool' is the first line from a poem I can remember. To grow up as a schoolchild in Chicago is to know the name of Gwendolyn Brooks, most likely as the woman who wrote the short poem that starts with a group of 'real cool' young people leaving school and ends with their early death" (1, 3). Note Ewing's emphasis on memory, brevity ("the short poem"), and the opening *phrase* of the text ("the first line") rather than its fully capitalized title.

[25] My thinking here is informed by Kate Marshall's theorization of "infrastructural modernity," specifically her discussion of "the body parts clogging circulatory structures" in Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son* (95).

“glorifying ideologies of common man”—as they navigate, articulate, and critique the dynamic fixities of race and class (Baker 569). More generally, this practice of “socialized forms”—a practice in which technical features embodying or connoting “brevity” are imbued with political meanings by the fictionalized situations they repeatedly index—serves as a means for their author to balance her competing commitments.

Responding to that tension, Brooks’s poetics serves as a means of exploring the unpredictable diffusion of what she calls the “little powerhouse” of a phrase that becomes a semi-detachable particulate (Bezner 120). Both the trajectories of “We Real Cool” in time and Brooks’s reflections on those tangles position it *as* one such particulate. She addresses it as having potentially slipped not only out of its circumstances of production but out of time: “It always surprises me … I keep thinking that it came earlier,” she remarks of her remarkably popular poem in the 1970s (Hull and Gallagher 96). Following such slippages into the future rather than past, I follow that poem into “The Golden Shovel,” a poetic form recently developed by Terrance Hayes, which he attributes to the cyclicity of “We Real Cool.” This trajectory is an example of what Reed refers to as “the shareable techniques that mark the site where literature touches the social and historical” and suggests the way in which shared formal resources function to both convey and evade history’s limits (6).

lighght

If Pound’s excisive poetics aggravates the axis of production and Brooks’s calibrations of the short line similarly impact that of circulation, Aram Saroyan’s minimal poems redirect the pressure of extreme brevity to the axis of reception. But in his avant-garde embrace of sheer perceptual novelty, Saroyan would seem a far cry from Pound’s sweeping, didactic impulses and

Brooks's uneasily populist modernism. Indeed, terms like "thematics of shortness" would seem to founder against Saroyan's declaration that "the word constellation … never never never should refer outside—to anything outside it" (Solt 57). By this reasoning, one must avoid mimesis entirely, avoid writing "as a 'regular' poet, imitating effects … in Creeley, Ashbery, everybody." Doing so? "That's entirely old—ruinously old," Saroyan insists. Yet his single-lexeme poem "lighght" in fact engages questions of resource allocation that rhyme convincing with those embedded in Brooks's explorations of the catching phrase and even with Pound's drive to find assistance for the artists he judged the best workers. Backing away from familiar demonstrations of virtuosity, Saroyan's minimal poems deploy extreme brevity and a notably "soft" or "weak" visuality that targets perception, but they do so less to blur or ambiguate meaning than to instantiate a demand that the bare minimum be understood as sufficient.

Experiments in the late 1960s and 1970s in backing away from demonstrable effort and skill resonated with not only broad postwar economic trends but also the contemporaneous political discourse surrounding government "support" for the arts and social programs more broadly. Members of Congress coalesced on the right to attack, in particular, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Saroyan's poem was caught up in those debates, becoming in the hands of Republican Senators a recurrent example of the misdirection of funds toward undeserving cultural non-producers. Taking these responses as indicative of the burden that textual scarcity places on readers, I argue that the politically motivated interpretations of Saroyan's work collected in the Congressional Record are unwittingly insightful, despite the abhorrent policy objectives many of them were deployed to try to effect. The relevant Congressional debates, in this light, are an array of reader responses that clarify a relatively straightforward but rarely formulated reading of minimalism. In effect, Saroyan's combination of brevity and error positions the artistic medium as an analogy for institutional support. In this metaphorization of media, the page becomes something like an overthin “safety net.” The distribution of Saroyan’s poems in the twenty-first century—by way of the Brooklyn-based small press Ugly Duckling and the online archive Eclipse—enables us to revisit that vision in an era of increasing scarcity but also of an increasing number of small institutions and archives that offer their own forms of support.

Coda

A reflexively brief closing section synthesizes the differential engagements with verbal reduction enacted by Pound, Brooks, and Saroyan by considering brevity as a shared and flexible resource that partly defines the field of modern poetry. The effects of that “resource” on three otherwise quite different writers are at times strikingly similar. For instance, each of their most famous poems skirts the threat of an alter-ego genre: “Metro” approaches the ornament; “Cool,” the jingle; “lighght,” the mere typo. Understanding such genres to be fluidly technical rather than resistantly formal, I address how the actual and enduring forms-in-history taken by these three very short poems force a confrontation between two competing critical demands: the demand to return each work to its exact moment of production—a kind of textual originalism—and an antithetical demand to avoid treating the work as harboring an essence and to instead tell the heterogeneous stories of its afterlives. If my conclusion argues for calibrating a balance between those two apparently irreconcilable approaches, the steps of that calibration are what brief poems themselves seem best suited to provide. And it is to one such poem, at a point midway through its century-long life, that we now turn.

CHAPTER 1

The Modernist Work Ethic: Cutting Cadences in the Poetry of Ezra Pound

1. A Small Act of Modernism

The year is 1964. The scene is an unassuming and now mostly forgotten symposium in Cologne, Germany.[26] Gathered are many of the most influential Central European literary intellectuals of the era, plus a lone American: Wolfgang Iser, Siegfried Kracauer, Hans Robert Jauss, Jacob Taubes, M. H. Abrams, and others. Their topic is "The Lyric as Paradigm of Modernity," and the events are framed by discussions of Hegel and Baudelaire, on one end, and T. S. Eliot and Apollinaire, on the other. In the eighth and final session, respondents are exploring the questions raised by a paper on image and montage in modern English-language poetry given by Iser himself, a founder of reception theory and the colloquium's presiding figure, under whose name the proceedings would be published.[27]

The moment I wish to zoom-in on occurs when Iser and Abrams—the latter the only participant whose contributions appear in English—good-naturedly bat back and forth a small poem, one that comes to three lines, twenty words, and twenty-seven syllables, if we include its title: Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" (1913). The participants have been keen to engage with the theory and practice of Imagism, articulated in the writings of Pound and the British philosopher and poet T. E. Hulme, as they relate to the perceptual and imaginative entailments of texts structured around moments of surprise. In his talk, Iser examines Hulme's "Above the Dock," a four-line poem from 1912 in which "the moon" reveals itself to be "but a child's balloon," which he then links to the standard version of Pound's "Metro."[28]

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[26] Paul de Man mentions the conference in "Lyric and Modernity," *Blindness and Insight* (1971).

[27] Iser, *Immanente Ästhetik, Ästhetische Reflexion: Lyrik als Paradigma der Moderne* (1966). Abrams's lecture and replies are printed in English. All other excerpts from the symposium are my own translations from the German.

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Each of these poems seems to present two images, or two different versions of a single image, and Abrams's response to Iser's juxtaposition of juxtapositions is telling. It conveys what will be one of the central conceits of this chapter, so I quote it in full:

> The poems by Hulme and by Pound which W. Iser has discussed reveal how much Pound learned from Hulme, but they also reveal that Pound improved upon the example of this teacher. Both poems juxtapose two images which, by their radical incongruity, produce a shock-effect which stimulates the imagination of the reader to relate them to each other. But in Hulme's poem the shock is weakened: the poem contains "too many bridges," of the kind Hulme himself decried in his critical writings. If we omit the bridges in his poem, in order to sharpen the impact of his "dry, hard" images, we get the following:
>
> *Above the Dock*
>
> Tangled in the tall mast's corded height,
> Hangs the moon;
> A child's balloon, forgotten after play.

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[28] Iser's source is the 1948 edition of Pound's *Selected Poems*, edited by T. S. Eliot.

> We are thus able to devise a poem which, by Hulme's own criteria, is better than Hulme's original one —although only with the assistance of Pound's example, in his *In a Station of the Metro*. (502-3)

For this interval, Abrams has switched, however briefly, from discussing modern poetry to *performing a small act of modernism*—a modernist labor, I will argue. Earlier, Iser lauds how "Metro" extends "an incentive for the imagination" (369). In his account, the "reduction" Pound achieves, of two images to one, elicits "participation" by requiring the reader "to mobilize new ways of seeing" (369). His interlocutor literalizes that reading by applying it to "Above the Dock."[29] The symposium is in fact the second installment of a series titled "Poetics and Hermeneutics," and here the focus shifts, momentarily, from hermeneutics to poetics—from the interpretive and experiential questions raised by short poems to the textual economics of composition—in a manner that undermines that distinction by mobilizing it. The discussants for their part seem satisfied with this freshly fashioned evidence. Kracauer is the next to speak and affirms the edits: "The poem's character is well preserved here" (502). By Hulme's own logic of bridge-removal, if the revision preserves the qualities of the original, it must be "better" and "improved upon" by the cuttings *because* it is shorter. Abrams's gesture, that is, reminds us that one thing critics "learned from" the modernists was to treat compression as a nearly unassailable compositional virtue.[30]

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[29] Hulme's original reads, "Above the quiet dock in mid night, / Tangled in the tall mast's corded height, / Hangs the moon. What seemed so far away / Is but a child's balloon, forgotten after play" (Pound, *Personae* 267).

[30] In certain respects, of course, postwar American literary criticism as a whole "learned from" Pound. As the General Editor of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* from its instantiation in 1962 until the 1990s, Abrams helped define the canon for both teachers and scholars, and the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (1st ed., 1979), modeled on Abrams's hugely successful British series, not only included the same version of "Metro" Iser cites (which from then on appears consistently in a number of Norton editions), but also gave Pound pride of place. Of all the authors sampled in the two-volume American edition, he is the only one who "jumps" his slot in terms of

A concern for verbal brevity was certainly in the air in early twentieth-century London, where Pound made his home from 1908 until 1920, even as the Imagists and their peers formulated that concern with particular force (and in opposition, we might say, to just such phrases as "in the air"). The sources of that concern are varied. They include, at minimum, ideas about Japanese aesthetics, the Chinese literary tradition, the Hellenic literary and sculptural traditions, and French *vers libre*.[31] The tensions and goals pushing artists and writers in the direction of such sources were to some extent "prior" to those sources, in terms of the logic of causality, and thus more difficult to name. Three we might highlight would be an antipathy toward the perceived excesses of Victorian literature and political rhetoric; the growing influence of a more modern rhetoric, that of efficiency; and, more abstractly in theory if not necessarily in practice, the drive toward specialization concomitant with the functional differentiation that partly defines modernity.[32] All three of those play a role in my own discussion, but I will spend the most time arguing for the relevance of managerial philosophy, with respect to its mandate for verbal concision and the related development of "the memo." My sense is that that account is the least developed in the existing critical literature, and that it tends to surface most often in discussions of *post*-1945 literary production, in ways that are occasionally misleading, though not by any means inaccurate.

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birth order. The contributions from Pound (1885-1972) appear in pole position in the "American Literature between the Wars 1914-1945" section of Vol. 2 (1865-the present), before multiple major figures born earlier.

[31] Regarding the influence of East Asian literary traditions, consider remarks on brevity made by F. S. Flint, A. C. Graham, and Pound: "[The modern poet] must write, I think, like these Japanese, in snatches of song. The day of the lengthy poem is over—at least for this troubled age" (Flint 212-13); "[the] gift of terseness is the least dispensable literary qualification of a translator from Chinese" (Graham 19); and "There is no long poem in chinese. … THE period was 4th cent. B.C.—Chu Yüan, *Imagiste*" (*EP and Dorothy Shakespear* 264). All three opinions are Orientalist distortions, but only Pound has his facts wrong: Chu Yüan or Qu Yuan is best known for being the likely author of the 373-line *Li Sao*, the earliest known ancient Chinese long poem (Hawkes 41).

[32] See, for example, Sherry; Raitt; and Luhmann, 48.

In any case, the authors Abrams discusses were no strangers to either what Iser terms "the reduction effect" (*dem Reduktions-effect*) or what Kracauer calls the "tightest form" (*knappsten Form*) (370, 503). Hulme for his part defined "Beauty" in 1909 as "the marking-time, the stationary vibration, the feigned ecstasy of an arrested impulse unable to reach its natural end" (1273). His vision of the unconsummated impulse suggests something like the authorial abbreviations popular at the time (T. E., F. S., A. C., T. S., H. D., etc.) heightened to the level of erotic infinity. Hulme's own poems repeatedly activate images of diminishment even when the pleasures they describe are more cozy than sexual: "Oh, God, make small / The old star-eaten blanket of the sky, / That I may fold it round me and in comfort lie" (Hulme 1274). His corpus of poems was itself limited by his early death in World War I, and Pound would go on to incorporate it in its entirety—as "Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme"—in editions of his own poetry. "They are reprinted here," Pound explains, partly "for convenience, seeing their smallness of bulk" (Hulme 1272-73). One central strain in the philosophy of proto-Imagism might by this light be itself minimized as "[to] make small."[33]

If Abrams's intervention underscores the frequent misalignment between that philosophy and its practice, whereby Imagist poems only occasionally reflect the virtues of terseness or "hardness" for which their authors openly advocate, it also calls attention to just how deeply attempts at alignment were and are bound up with *excision or cutting*, as expressed in Abrams's key decision, "If we omit the bridges…" The effort of cutting, I want to suggest, constitutes what Pound repeatedly calls the "real work," "*real* work," or "REAL WORK" of literary labor for many writers and readers of modernist poetry.[34] Abrams's revision itself entails removing Hulme's first line on the premise that its work is already accomplished by the title, while also trimming the end of the penultimate line and the beginning of the final one. The most notable feature of what Abrams has "devise[d]" is the gap in line three. That gap, I want to suggest, signifies Abrams's own revisionary labors. Whatever its varied poetic functions, or their implications for a given reader's response, the major meta-poetic function of that gap is to serve as a signal of decision-making and writerly labor: proof-of-work.[35]

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[33] In *Culture & Society*, Raymond Williams echoes Pound's gesture by depositing Hulme in his interlude section (the "Mud of Interregnum" from 1870-1914) between the "Nineteenth-Century Tradition" and "Twentieth-Century Opinions": "I shall then treat the writers of that period who have affected our thinking about culture, in a brief, separate section. If they were neglected altogether, certain important links would be missing. We shall not find in them, except perhaps in Hulme, any thing very new: a working-out, rather, of unfinished lines; a tentative redirection. Such work requires notice, but suggests brevity" (173-74).

Within the context of poetic production, a number of features of this episode are representative in ways that can help us unpack the history of the poem that enables Abrams's own efforts, Pound's "Metro." First, the act of poetic labor is one of "cutting" on multiple levels: both the removal of extraneous material, but also the cutting of the lines into their own distinct units, so that "Hangs the moon" has an integrity distinct from that of "Tangled in the tall mast's corded height," rather than one preordained by line-length or regular versification. Second, that act at once hides and calls attention to its having taken place. This is one of the paradoxes at the heart of verbal brevity: *Short texts force an unusually direct confrontation with the (actual or apparent) ephemerality of writerly work*. Brevity, that is, poses a challenge because it aggravates the felt tensions generated by the always uncertain status of "intellectual" labor as largely inconspicuous (difficult to register) and the related, always unstable distinction between writing and "real work." Third, the evidence that may exist can be difficult to discern. A short work may appear effortless (because so brief) or effortful (because condensed or packed with meaning), but in either case the evidence is by definition paltry. Such evidence can take the form of absence, as in the blank space of the missing half-line. It can take the form of anecdote, as in Abram's discussion of his own process—which is to say it can manifest as "an annotation that is longer than the poem itself" (Hayot 23).[36] Or it can the form of highly wrought formal features that audiences find tricky to pin down. We might posit, for instance, that the "dry, hard" tone of Hulme's poem is ratcheted up (made drier and harder) by Abram's excisions. As this litany suggests, if the amount and kind of work (in terms of time, effort, or skill) put into a written text is always difficult to gauge, an obtrusively short text sends the labor-gauge spinning like a compass near the North or South Pole.[37]

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[34] See Pound, *Selected Letters*, 8, 146, 256, 259, 325. Rainey cites an unpublished letter from Pound to Henry Allen Moe at the Guggenheim Foundation in which Pound summarizes Sigismondo Malatesta writing (to Giovanni di Cosimo de' Medici) that "he wants the master painter [likely Pier della Francesca] for life, with a set provision to be given … 'So that he can work as he likes or not'" and then continues, in his own voice, "Ma[l]atesta got the goods. And he was enough of an artist himself to know that you can't always tell when an artist is loafing. Real work may be done on tennis court or in trolley car, and sham work at desk" (70).

[35] In this respect, it might be said to share something with examples such as the cracked line in Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" (1924) or the slash that opens Olson's "The Kingfishers" (1953) (121; *Selected Writings* 167).

One way to think of this is that many modern poets feel themselves to have a dual imperative to work hard *and* to be brief; those imperatives, moreover, are simultaneously aligned (being brief, as in the Hulme-Abrams episode, is part and parcel of doing the work) and at odds (being brief abolishes potential evidence of hard work). Why did poets feel the need to demonstrate themselves as working or having worked hard? And why, if reduction puts pressure on the demonstration of anything, bother with brevity at all? Neither these imperatives nor the questions they raise are universal, of course, but they do obtain widely among modernists. Pound's early poetry, I hope to show, provides partial answers to the questions and, perhaps more importantly, may help us see in what ways the twin imperatives do or do not still endure, more than a half-century after Abrams's small act.

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[36] Attending to "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance" and "Fan-Piece, for Her Imperial Lord," Hayot argues persuasively that the "difference" of those very short poems, "the part that needs translating," "lies just as much with Pound's adoption of new aesthetic techniques … as it does with the fact that [they were] originally written in Chinese" (26, 22-30). I would underscore that it is a privileging of condensation that sutures these two types of "difference" (cultural and modernist) together for Pound. The poet's annotations should be understood as instances of the proliferation that that doubled condensation, because it involves an erasure of labor, inevitably sponsors.

[37] We might analogize the productively unstable distinction between the authentic aesthetic innovation and the mere novelty to that between driving a compass haywire by trudging to one of the poles and doing so by employing a small magnet.

In attending to Pound, the first of this chapter's two major goals—its more contextual one—will be to delineate "the modernist work ethic," a phenomenon that is by no means unfamiliar to readers of early twentieth-century literature but has thus far been left unnamed, even as the "extraordinarily persistent" high valuation of work itself has received renewed critical attention (Weeks 82). The basic premise of that concept is that practitioners of aesthetic modernism display a tendency—in their artistic productions, their peripheral writings, and their self-presentations—to privilege hard work, and that that privileging undergirds and overrides the wide variety of metaphors—from those of the farm to those of the scientific laboratory—they use to define the role of the artist. Here, as a placeholder, we might recall George Plimpton's masculinist description of Ernest Hemingway standing over his typewriter, "perspiring heavily," and tracking his productivity on a piece of cardboard hung "under the nose of a mounted gazelle head": "The numbers on the chart showing the daily output of words differ from 450, 575, 462, 1250, back to 512, the higher figures on days Hemingway puts in extra work so he won't feel guilty spending the following day fishing on the Gulf Stream" (221, 219). Or, we might recall and then pocket a maxim from Auguste Rodin: "Only work."[38]

Examining Pound's writing in this context will allow us to better conceptualize certain of its features: paratexts about ceaseless literary labor, images of working and not-working, rhythms that connote “hardness,” and explicit economic demands for a shorter working day. Because Pound’s “Metro” poem represents an extreme case, its prehistory and long life together provide a particularly revealing entrée into the tensions regarding the labor of writing that condensation forces upon authors and readers. My wager is that analyzing the fraught modernist focus on brevity in its discursive and sociological contexts allows us to see Pound’s innovations as a textual-materialist response to the dramatic expansion of the “white-collar masses” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, more abstractly, to the increasingly unstable (and arguably misguided but nevertheless felt and thus influential) distinction between “real” work and writing (Mills 76). If, as I have just suggested, modernist metaphors for good literary labor differ—from plowing to carpentry to science—in ways that I am suggesting do not make a difference, similarly the outside of that labor is both variable—the journalist, rhetorician, politician, bureaucrat, clerk, critic, or scholar—and surprisingly steadfast. The ur-villain for Pound is *the middleman*, and distinctions between bad journalists and bad politicians, say, are relatively insignificant. Either way, “the locusts have gnawed us with word-work,” as Pound puts it in one of his late translations from *The Classic Anthology of Confucius* (*New Selected* 266). That line carries the loose three-beat rhythm—”the lócusts have gnáwed us with wórd-wòrk”—that I will later analyze in Pound’s much earlier poetry in relation to concerns about labor and the physical world.[39] For now, Richard Sieburth helpfully glosses its meaning: “This fuses actual locusts in the grain-field with trivial bureaucrats; for as all beneficences are intertwined, so are all calamities” (“The Sound of Pound” n.p.). The calamities of vacuous word-work are, for

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[38] Blok gives Rodin's "favorite maxim" in full as "*Il faut travailler, rien que travailler. Et il faut avoir patience* [You have to work, only work. And you have to have patience]" (11). The French sculptor did not occupy a central place in Pound's thought, but in a 1913 review of Rabindranath Tagore, Pound praises the Bengali poet's "subtle underflow" for exhibiting "[t]he sort of profound apperception of [life] which leads Rodin to proclaim that 'Energy is Beauty'" ("Rabindranath Tagore" 576). *That* maxim prefigures Pound's comments on Vorticism, and Rodin was an unavoidable influence on the early work of the Vorticist sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. In his memoir of the latter, Pound relents, "M. Rodin has been the most striking figure in his generation of sculptors, and it is not proper to pluck at the beards of old men, especially when they are doing fine things" (95).

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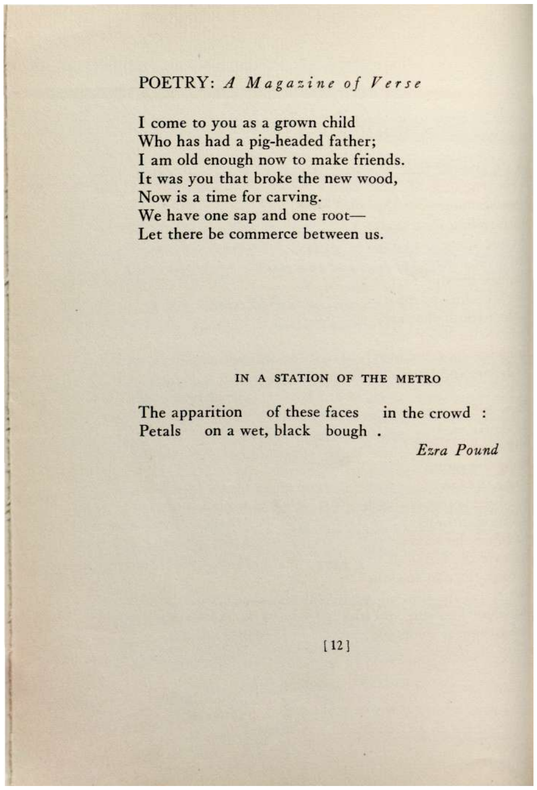
[39] My notation system designates the most prominent stresses in a passage with the standard accent mark (´), used in many languages, over the first vowel of the relevant syllable, and it designates semi-prominent stresses with a reverse accent mark (`). This heuristic has the virtue of simplicity, in terms of readability and type-ability, but it also has certain drawbacks: weak or unstressed syllables will remain unmarked; the core of a stressed syllable in English not infrequently consists of more than a single letter (as in *au*dience or *rea*dy); and so forth.

Pound and for many of his peers, universally those of white-collar work because, at the time, as work of all kinds becomes increasingly "intellectual," symbolic, or cognitive, determinedly literary writers are increasingly required to find ways to distinguish their efforts (their work) and their products (their works) from those of the world of work more generally.

To provide a punctuated series of "holds" on these larger questions, my chapter's second, more purely textual goal will be to provide readings of the three major versions of "In a Station of the Metro." That well-known poem, circulating widely both during and after Pound's lifetime, has appeared in a variety of flavors and media, so it will be helpful to delineate its key versions before attempting to interpret their differences. Such interpretations—clear and substantial claims about the differences between the major printings of "Metro"—have been surprisingly rare in the voluminous and often incisive scholarship on Pound. Having here sketched the basic labor-paradox of brevity, we are now ready to survey those three major versions of "Metro" in order to trace how that paradox plays out in poetry by way of four sets of interrelated texts: preparatory materials ("Imagisme" and "A Few Don'ts") published in the issue preceding the first publication of "Metro," which speak to how acts of excision reveal conflicts between the demand for "efficiency" and the demand for hard work; Pound's early anecdotes about the construction of his poem; the sequence of poems, titled "Contemporania," with which "Metro" was first published, with particular attention to the images of labor and non-labor and the three-beat rhythm running through that sequence; and finally, in the sixth and concluding section of this chapter, the afterlives of "Metro," in the rhythms of *Cathay* (1915) and *The Cantos* (1970) and in the recent reemergence of its "original" fragmented version.

2. Two or Three Stations of "Metro"

Throughout the lifespan of "In a Station of the Metro," prominent readers have on occasion found it to be definitional—of Imagism, literary modernism, or even poetry itself—and have nearly always acknowledged its replicative success. In 1964, Iser calls it Pound's "much-cited" (*vielzitierten*) poem (368). Hugh Kenner refers to it as "[t]he most famous of all Imagist poems" but also, more laconically, "this tiny poem" (183-84, 185). More recently, Eric Hayot dubs the piece Pound's "best-known poem," Jahan Ramazani names it "a key poem in the modernist canon," Paul Armstrong calls it a "modernist classic," and political journalist Ash Sarkar raves, "in just two lines, [Pound] composed what I consider to be the single greatest poem ever written" (28; 85; 113; n.p.).



POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

I come to you as a grown child
Who has had a pig-headed father;
I am old enough now to make friends.
It was you that broke the new wood,
Now is a time for carving.
We have one sap and one root—
Let there be commerce between us.

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition   of these faces   in the crowd :
Petals   on a wet, black   bough .
Ezra Pound

[12]

Fig. 2. "Metro" in *Poetry*, April 1913. (Credit: The Modernist Journals Project)

That poem's public debut took place in the April 1913 issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (see Fig. 2). At the time, it produced a "shock-effect" of a somewhat different sort than that under discussion in Cologne in the 1960s. It unusual layout and its brevity—extreme even in a moment when writers of all kinds, as we will see, were finding virtue in economy—seemed to give it an atmosphere of being simultaneously ostentatious and fragile. It looked not only "tiny" but also as if it were sticking out its elbows, jostling for space in the abundant field of publishing bequeathed to the new century by the previous. Pound declares his general intention regarding the layout quite explicitly in a March 30, 1913 letter to Harriet Monroe, founder and editor of *Poetry*, just weeks before the issue was printed: "In the 'Metro' hokku, I was careful, I think, to indicate the spaces between the rhythmic units, and I want them observed" (SL 55).[40]

In a manner somewhat reminiscent of the poem's call to Abrams's editorial impulses, both those faithfully "observed" spaces and the poem's sheer meagerness pulled in the parodists. In January 1914, Richard Aldington, one of the three founders of the school of Imagism, replaced "these faces" with "these poems," registering the original's meta-poetic aspect. His piece gently mocks his friend's seemingly attention-seeking use of space by including the color adjective implied by but notably absent from Pound's original and concluding on an ironized, non-epiphanic note: "White faces   in a black   dead faint" (36). Later that year in *The New Age*, A. R. Orage parodies not the layout of Pound's poem but its triviality.[41] He mocks its

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[40] A popular French translation of classic haiku appeared in 1906, and two years earlier the Japanese author Yone Noguchi, with whom Pound was later in contact, published an article introducing and advocating for the form in English. Noguchi gently chastises American poets for "say[ing] too much" and offers the "Hokku (seventeen-syllable poem)" as a solution to their prolixity ("A Proposal to American Poets" 248). The haiku, for Noguchi, is at once "like a tiny star" and something close to hand; in a 1913 article for the London quarterly *Rhythm*, he calls it a "gem-small form of utterance" (n.p.). The form's small size seems to give it great promise for the unwieldy medium of "my beloved English" (248).

[41] Quoted in Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict*, 155. Orage's review (written under the pseudonym R. H. C.) is of Pound's "Vorticism" essay, which quotes "Metro" in full but without the unusual spacing.

"success," taking umbrage at Pound's phrase "the perfect image." "I could invent a score of other images of quite equal equivalence. So could anybody," he insists listing eight "bon-bons" that might serve in the stead of the poem's replaceable line of "Petals": "flaming orchids growing upon a gooseberry bush," "war medals on a ragged waistcoat," and so on (499). Other early commentators were even less generous. In 1928, one notes that "even in the single poem [Pound] will stop where the poet has hardly more than begun," quoting "Metro" in full and concluding with dissatisfaction, "But that is all" (*Saturday Review* 851). Another, writing in 1932, haughtily dismisses it: "Ezra Pound writes this and calls it poetry" (Brenton 26).

Before any of these rebukes or parodies were published, Pound had in fact already printed the poem without its ostentatious holes. He quotes both lines (without their title) in the cramped columns of an article for *T. P.'s Weekly* in June 1913. I will return to that article later, but for now we can simply note that Pound prints it twice more in roughly that form when he cites it in his essay "Vorticism," which appeared in the November 1914 issue of the *Fortnightly Review*, and anthologizes it in the *Catholic Anthology: 1914-1915* (1915). From there, the last major change to "Metro" is a shift from a colon to a semicolon between its two lines, which many readers have taken to increase the subtlety of their relation.

The unspaced and re-punctuated version was circulated as the second major printing in 1916 in the UK edition of *Lustra*, which was published a year later as Pound's first U.S. trade volume (see Fig. 3).[42]

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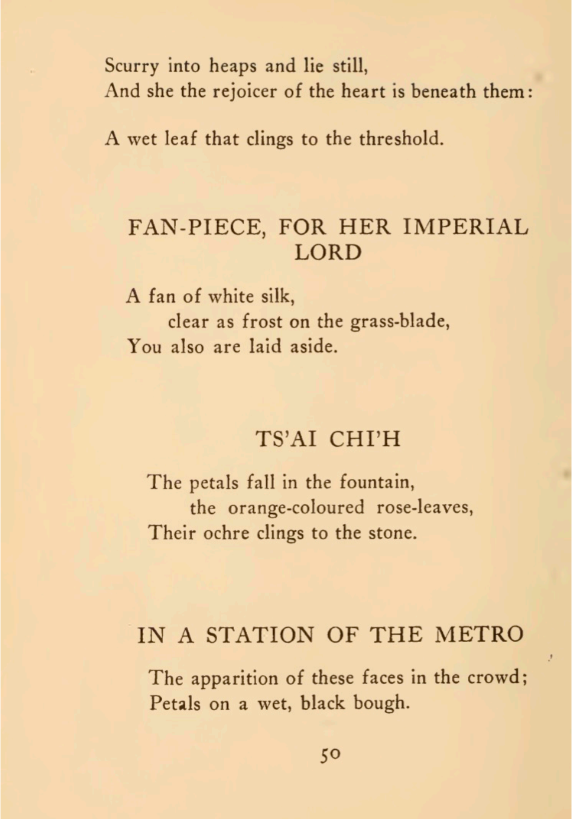
[42] Sieburth explains, "[Pound's] first venture into the U.S. trade market was his 1917 volume *Lustra*, which his New York patron and agent John Quinn had recommended to the newly founded house of Alfred A. Knopf. Providing the first full-scale selection of his poetry from his earliest work through his recent *Cantos*, *Lustra* was the volume that would define Pound to the postwar generation of American poets that mattered. … Publication by Knopf briefly placed expatriate Pound in the commercial vanguard of New York publishing" (*New Selected* 355).


Scurry into heaps and lie still,
And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them:

A wet leaf that clings to the threshold.

FAN-PIECE, FOR HER IMPERIAL LORD

A fan of white silk,
clear as frost on the grass-blade,
You also are laid aside.

TS'AI CHI'H

The petals fall in the fountain,
the orange-coloured rose-leaves,
Their ochre clings to the stone.

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

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Fig. 3. "Metro" in *Lustra*, 1917.

In both editions, "Metro" was placed at Pound's discretion alongside short poems informed by those "from the Chinese" that had been gathered previously in *Cathay*. Louis Untermeyer was first editor to anthologize this now-canonical version of "Metro" when he included it, in part based on its delicacy, in the first edition of *Modern American Poetry* (1919). Somewhat unexpectedly, then, Untermeyer pens a predominantly negative deferred review of *Lustra* in late 1920. The budding anthologist castigates the inclusion of Pound's every "slightest utterance," "every triviality," and each "bad joke" (Erkkila 77). He decries a different single-couplet poem, "New Cake of Soap," as "paper-motto silliness." And of "Papyrus," Pound's famously condensed adaptation of a fragment from Sappho, he writes, "White paper is evidently not so precious as the publishers would have us believe." "Metro," however, evades Untermeyer's scorn. He lists it as among those “aesthetic” pieces exemplifying “the subtleties of light, shadow, movement.” And he would continue to include it in later installments of his increasingly popular anthology, as often as not crowding it onto a two-column page alongside multiple other texts. Out in the world, it circulated more and more widely as Untermeyer’s anthologies were distributed to soldiers during WWII and served, at home, as a key resource for mid-century poets as unaffiliated as Allen Ginsberg and Gwendolyn Brooks (Bezner 119).

As it circulated, from the ground of the classroom to the pages of poetic-production to the clouds of high theory, the poem continued to pull in its readers, turning them into users and makers.[43] Just as Untermeyer’s collections were taking off, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren began publishing their own influential anthology, *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (1938, 1950, 1960, 1976), all four editions of which included “Metro” bejeweled with an asterisk. In the third edition, the editors—reflecting a widespread tendency to read the poem’s “Petals” as downtrodden modern commuters—offer “Dead leaves caught in the gutter’s stream” and “Dry leaves blown down the dry gutter” as pedagogically productive alternatives to the poem’s last line (“What would be the difference?” they ask) before revealing them as inferior (“They lose the shock of surprise, the suddenness of the perception”) (89). Meanwhile, plenty of artists—including the poets Czesław Miłosz, Steve McCaffrey, Myung Mi Kim, and Timothy Yu; the painters Victor Man and Maud Bryt; the filmmaker Chris Marker; and the musician Dan Bejar—have engaged directly with “Metro” in their work, producing more substantive, if often still partly critical, replies than Aldington or Orage could muster. In the realm of critical theory, Veronica Forrest-Thomson positions an extended reading of “Metro” at the core of her argument in *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry* (1978), and she addresses the issues of omission raised by the poem through her own small textual intervention: “What is innovatory about ‘Metro’ is that it leaves out the connecting link between the statements, which would have been so easy to supply: the apparition of these faces in the crowd is like petals on a wet, black bough” (67).[44]

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[43] For a use-oriented reading of a different period in American poetry, see Cohen, 1-15.

As Forrest-Thomson notes, part of the couplet’s appeal derives from the fact that its comparison between the “faces” of line one and the “Petals” of line two is implicit, compressed, and insistently partial. Those limits have tended to generate a kind of hermeneutic whirlpool. Pound’s interpreters rightly insist, for example, on the complex effects resulting from the absence of a viewing subject or a verb-phrase (e.g., Forrest-Thomson’s “is like”) connecting the superimposed images. The petals, of course, are compared not directly to “these faces” but to “the apparition” of them, and critics frequently highlight the peculiarity of the poem’s only word of more than two syllables as well as, if somewhat less frequently, that the implied comparison is between one noun phrase that is grammatically singular and one that is plural. The keyword in such discussions is often “mystery” or “secret.” “This word [‘apparitions’] veils the faces in mystery,” remarks Hugh Witemeyer (34). In a similar vein, Kenneth Lincoln calls the poem “mysteriously cadenced” and, following Kenner’s lead, links its setting in the Paris underground to the myth of Eurydice and “the Orphic mystery cults” before concluding, “That’s one of the secrets of good literature: there’s always more to be considered beyond the parsing, assumptions to be revised, mysteries.” Iser himself admits, “without the hint given in the heading, the two lines would remain a riddle [*Rätsel*]” (369). In a deconstructive mode, Joseph Riddel associates Pound’s couplet with “riddles,” “enigma,” and “the secret that inhabits every repetition,” while

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[44] She continues, “That omission does not suggest a mistrust of the power of poetic imagery or of the reader’s poetic competence. Nor does it suggest, as Pound believed, that Imagism had invented a new technique for ‘getting at the things’ through poetic language by by-passing ordinary language. On the contrary, ‘Metro’ relies more than other poems on these basic technical skills,” and her reading takes up the bulk of a chapter (66-80).

Jyan-Lung Lin concurs that “Pound succeeds in building up a mood of mystery” (577; 180). At the farthest edge of this spectrum, in a nearly campy ramping up of the poem’s gothic ghostliness, Daniel Tiffany finds it exemplary of the obscure and never-divulged “Doctrine of the Image” (slightly more on which below) and Pound’s “cryptaesthetic” (Flint 199; Tiffany 46, 117).[45] From our current vantage, one approach to all this critical “mystery” might be to unveil it as exemplifying a disciplinary norm of “better living through ambiguity” (Seltzer, “The Graphic Unconscious” 21). Yet the small revelations and big thrill of Tiffany’s approach would seem to reflect how a short text imbued with even a micro-dose of the strange has the potential to remain generative—for better living or otherwise.

In part because of this proliferation, in the twenty-first century, scholars and editors have begun returning the poem to its “original” state. Beginning in 2003, with Richard Sieburth’s edition of Pound’s *Poems & Translations*, it has been common to print the spaced version. For the one-hundredth anniversary of *Poetry* magazine in 2012, Don Share and Christian Wiman compiled *The Open Door: 100 Poems, 100 Years of Poetry Magazine*. The first poem in that anthology? It is Pound’s “Metro,” in its original version and finally with an entire page to itself. A few months later, in celebration of the poem’s own centennial, it appeared as a banner on the side of a subway entrance on State Street in downtown Chicago. That public appearance of Pound’s very short poem was one element in a larger installation and campaign run by the Poetry Foundation in collaboration with the Chicago Loop Alliance, a “development”-oriented business organization. At the end of this chapter, I will address this manifestation of the poem and briefly touch on its relationship to the Foundation.

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[45] For Tiffany’s illuminating discussion of “Metro”—which he calls “Pound’s most famous Imagist poem” and, in an echo of Kenner, “(the most famous of all Imagist poems)”—see especially 101, 120, 156-58.

For now, I will just note that the title of the corresponding 2012 anthology derives from the editorial mission statement written by *Poetry*'s founder and editor-in-chief, Harriet Monroe, for the journal's second-ever issue in November 1912. In that piece, Monroe describes the need for a publication specializing in poetry, to give "the experimenter in verse" space that the world, she argues, well affords practitioners of the other arts. She begins with a statement of intent that links artistic ambition to size, declaring, "we hope to print poems of greater length, of more intimate and serious character than the other magazines can afford to use," but she spends far more of her essay insisting on the small, as cut through by "ample genius!":

> Fears have been expressed by a number of friendly critics that *Poetry* may become a house of refuge for minor poets. …
>
> Our solicitous critics should remember that Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Burns, were minor poets to the subjects of King George the Fourth, Poe and Whitman to the subjects of King Longfellow. Moreover, we might remind them that Drayton, Lovelace, Herrick, and many another delicate lyrist of the anthologies, whose perfect songs show singular tenacity of life, remain minor poets through the slightness of their motive; they created little master-pieces, not great ones. (62-64)

The link between the call to the functional differentiation of modern poetry—as a field of its own with its own trade publications, prizes, and room to maneuver—and the minor-ness, slightness, and littleness of the specific exhibits she presents might be seen to presage the centrality of "Metro" to the magazine's history, as embodied in the centennial anthology that borrows her essay's name, completing the circle if not exactly closing the door.[46] In the final section of this chapter, I will take up how Pound's poem—in its third version—functions in relation to that revolving door. Before that, though, the focus will in a sense be a juxtaposition of the juxtapositions represented by the two major versions published during Pound's lifetime.

3. Office Magic

> *They re-wrote his verses before his eyes, using about ten words to his fifty.*
>
> – F. S. Flint, "Imagisme" (Mar. 1, 1913)
>
> *This study developed that a number of that department's letters originally totaling 1,444 words could have carried their message just as well with 755 words, a showing of about 52% efficiency in handling correspondence.*
>
> – T. C. du Pont, untitled cover letter (Jan. 6, 1914)[47]

Modernism begins with a magic trick. That at least is Frank Stewart Flint's half-serious suggestion in his brief account toward the end of his introduction to "Imagisme," published in the March 1913 issue of *Poetry*.[48] That issue was the sixth overall of the Chicago-based specialty journal launched by Harriet Monroe in October 1912, and it owes its fame not to the forty missing words ("ten words to his fifty") but instead to "a few rules" Flint prints on behalf of the members of the new poetic "school" he describes and the subsequent "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," signed by Pound (199). Slices of these texts have entered the lexica of modern poetry and modernist studies as enduring slogans and have received an enormous amount of critical attention. The numbered rules are well known—"1. Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective," "2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation," "3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome"—but so too are Poundian precepts such as "Use no superfluous word" and "Go in fear of abstractions."[49] This familiarity applies even to the topic that follows the three rules, which Flint describes in a manner nearly comedic in its effort to conjure curiosity: The Imagists, he notes, "held also a certain 'Doctrine of the Image,'" that does "not concern the public, and would provoke useless discussion." That pre-evacuated tenet, though (or because) never "committed to writing," has indeed provoked (quite substantive) public discussion in histories of Imagism, accounts of modernist public-relations endeavors, and theoretical arguments about Pound's aesthetics.[50] Despite all this, the following portion of Flint's text has attracted almost no attention whatsoever. There Flint introduces a pair of "devices" as

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[46] The issue's next item is editorial copy announcing that Pound "has consented to act as foreign correspondent … keeping its readers informed of the present interests of the art in England, France and elsewhere" (64).

[47] Yates, 253, 323n91. Unless otherwise noted, quotations of corporate documents from E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Company refer to reproductions printed in Yates, *Control through Communication* (1989).

[48] The proximity between trickery and aesthetic technique in the long twentieth century has received a good deal of scholarly attention since the short version of that century came to a close. In his 2014 review of Carr's movement biography, *Verse Revolutionaries* (2009), Marsh posits, "That's the magic of imagism—it made the imagists' poetry better than it otherwise would have been" (130). From the other side of the same proximity, Churchill in her 2005 discussion of the 1917 *Spectra* hoax writes, "For all its high seriousness and insistence on authenticity, modernism was full of mischief" (23). Major discussions of this problematic include North, *Novelty* (2013), esp. 183-90, and Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick* (2020), esp. 42-49, 91-94. Both critics spend time tracing Stanley Cavell's balanced skepticism regarding aesthetic innovation, and Ngai synthesizes her central argument via a summation of Cavell's essay "Music Discomposed" (1967): "The impersonal concept of technique, and not the moral one of artistic intention, ultimately leads Cavell to this remarkable thesis: *all art becomes intrinsically gimmick-prone after*

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modernism" (49). In an earlier moment, Iser et al. spend time worrying the distinction between "the joke" and both "the epigram" and "the image" (499).

[49] The awkward past tense of the second rule ("did not") reflects the complex composition of these early documents. When Pound reprints the rules in "A Retrospect" (1918), he updates that verb to "does not"; removes the comma from the first rule; and adds a determiner ("the") before the first use of "sequence" in the last rule (LE 3). The historical record provides conflicting accounts regarding to what extent Pound should be understood as the author of the prose here published under Flint's name, but attribution has no substantial repercussions for my argument. The clearest summary of the development of "Imagisme" and "A Few Don'ts" is Ruthven, *EP as Literary Critic*, 66-73.

[50] In addition to the works from Kenner, Ruthven, Tiffany (1998), and Carr cited previously, see Harmer, *Victory in Limbo: Imagism, 1908-1917* (1975).

the pedagogical means "whereby they [the Imagists] persuaded approaching poetasters to attend their instruction" (199-200). The phrasing is anecdotal, as if Flint is relating a party trick observed with skeptical amusement from the back of a room:

> 1. They showed him his own thought already splendidly expressed in some classic …
> 2. They re-wrote his verses before his eyes, using about ten words to his fifty.

Disappearing tricks, then. The first makes the poet-in-training's apparent originality vanish by way of comparison to a predecessor. The second curtails a set of verses by eighty percent while, we are left to assume, retaining or bettering their substance. These two acts of modern magic (or *magisme*) share an emphasis on reduction that fits, to an extent, with our accepted histories of this moment in literary history. Pound's peers often spoke of his cutting of their own verses, for instance. His assistance with the tightening of Flint's rhymed 23-line poem "A Swan Song" (1909) into the unrhymed 16-line "The Swan" prior to its publication in the anthology *Des Imagistes* (1914), an editorial episode Flint describes as a distasteful half-revelation, may well lie behind the two party tricks (Ruthven 127). T. S. Eliot, with no hint of trauma, repeatedly acknowledges his debt to Pound for editing *The Waste Land* (1922). And of poetic composition in general, he opines that the "greatest service" one's good friends can provide is to say simply "this passage won't do" ("The Three Voices" 199). Likewise H.D. who in her memoir of Pound recalls his editorial skill with fondness: "I was 21 when Ezra left and it was some years later that he scratched 'H.D. Imagiste,' in London, in the Museum tea room, at the bottom of a typed sheet, now slashed with his creative pencil. 'Cut this out, shorten this line'" (41). H.D.'s active, plosive-thick verbs ("scratched," "slashed," "creative") underscore what is missing from Flint's description of the two tricks: effortful labor. This failure to register the effort or *work* of compression explains why Flint's disappearing tricks themselves disappear, from both Pound's subsequent circulations of Imagist theory and from the critical literature.[51] The facility of magic, like the facility of the joke and the gimmick, is at odds with the modernist work ethic.

Another way of framing this problem is to note that the tricks or moves of reduction may appear (or even be) remarkably similar across disparate genres of writing. The process of producing a poem and the process of producing, for instance, a memo become particularly difficult to distinguish when they both hinge on excision (and thus obscure their own traces). The contemporaneous epigraph above in which Thomas Coleman du Pont emphasizes the importance of verbal "efficiency" in the business world serves as a telling double of Pound's own repeated venerations of "something like 'maximum efficiency of expression' … [when] the writer has expressed something interesting in such a way that one cannot re-say it more effectively" (LE 56). The author of the more managerial formulation of that value, T. C. du Pont, was President of the E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Company (now DuPont) from 1902 to 1915 when the chemical firm was one of American's ten most valuable companies. Its headquarters were and still are in Wilmington, Delaware, not far from where Pound grew up and spent most of his pre-London years. In fact, while Pound was visiting his alma mater Hamilton College in 1939 and staying with his contemporary Edward Roots (a professor), the two of them "had 'Dupont (gun family) to lunch,' without incident," as A. D. Moody tells it, quoting from a letter Pound sent to his wife (Vol. II 309-10).

At the turn of the century, however, T. C. du Pont was busy overseeing a team of managers who rapidly modernized the firm's practices and communications. That team, according to business historian JoAnne Yates, pursued a philosophy of "systematic management," which she defines as the "attempt to achieve order and efficiency through managerial system or method" ("Emergence" 489). Building on the work of Joseph Litterer and Daniel Nelson, Yates reminds us that, although the term comes later, the practice of systematic management predates the more familiar and limited one of "scientific management" associated with Frederick Winslow Taylor, Frank Gilbreth, and Louis Brandeis. The latter, more familiar version of industrial modernization—our image of a Taylorite sub-manager on the factory floor with a stopwatch in hand—in fact "took for granted the improved managerial methods of systematic management throughout organizations and focused on additional reforms aimed specifically at the factory floor" (490). The modernization of white-collar labor, in this view, might be said to predate that of its blue-collar counterpart.

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[51] Whitworth suggests that Flint's instructional "devices" exemplify an imagist notion that "the raw material of poetry [is] not feeling, but language," a reading at odds with Pound's repeated references to "emotion" (9). Sullivan finds in Flint's two sentences evidence of the amenability of the practice of "excision" to "pedagogic and performative display" (504).

Yates's history highlights the development of "the memo" as a genre of intra-organizational communication that entails "[c]utting words" wherever possible and restructuring the protocols and format (i.e., the visual layout) of internal documents (*Control* 252). The excision of business-letter rhetoric (i.e., "eliminating the use of the traditional expressions and phrases of oldfashioned business correspondence, which employ many words for ideas which could be much better expressed in fewer words, and many of which could be omitted altogether") results in a dramatic cooling of the tone of such communications, but the governing impetus is efficiency (252). In "The Memo and Modernity" (2006), John Guillory provides a skillful summary of what he terms the Yates Thesis: "the memo emerged as a result of a new kind of managerial practice and *not as a development of rhetorical theory*" (116). Focusing on the centrality of "techniques for producing brevity" to Yates's account, Guillory complicates her argument, and the resulting Yates-Guillory thesis argues that an increasing elevation of the rhetorical principle of *brevitas* or concision over and above other norms such as *copia* (“the capacity for elegant variation and elaboration of a given theme”) in the influential treatises of “new rhetoric” (or, following Guillory’s logic, post-rhetoric) by Adam Smith (1750s) and Herbert Spencer (1871) pave the way not only for Harvard to replace the rhetoric-heavy Greek and Latin curriculum with the elective system in the 1870s but also for the development of a new communicative norms centered on information processing and of new “information genres,” including the memo.

What does this have to do with Imagism? For one, the myriad echoes of the rhetoric of “new rhetoric” in Pound’s influential “rules,” “Dont’s,” and declarations suggests that the former provides a crucial discursive context and intellectual atmosphere for Pound’s understanding of language. For example, Smith’s rather prolix eighteenth-century formulation, “For when there are no words that are superfluous but all tend to express something by themselves which was not said before and in a plain manner, we may call it precision” becomes in Pound’s hands, “Use no superfluous word” (Smith 6). Moreover, the trajectory Yates describes suggests that this rationalizing of verbal rationalization (that is, the way Pound’s phrasing enacts its own principles) was taking place concurrently in business administration, suggesting both a common impetus and the potential for conflict.[52] This was far from merely abstract. Tracing the pervasiveness of the efficient “elimination of waste” as a moral, political, and socio-economic value in the Edwardian era, Suzanne Raitt underscores its presence not only in the discourse of industry but in domestic guides and “personal efficiency manuals,” as well as how it played out, with a “masculinist bias,” within Imagism specifically (837-38, 841). Indeed, Pound’s emphasis on “the efficiency of verbal manifestation … the transmittiability [*sic*] of a conviction” fits neatly into the broader, emerging “communicational motive” described by Guillory (*ABC of Reading* 27; 120).

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[52] My thinking here is informed by Seltzer, “Writing Technologies” (1992): “The real innovation of Taylorization was *the redescription of managerialism and supervision in the idiom of production*. That is, the real innovation of Taylorization becomes visible in the incorporation of the *representation* or coding of the work process into the work process itself—or better, the incorporation of the representation of the work process *as* the work process itself. Taylor in effect rationalized rationalization” (174). This outcome might be understood as the contribution of Taylor’s “scientific management” to the broader process of “systematic management” that predates it.

At DuPont, the virtue of efficiency was prioritized beginning in 1902 and fully codified by 1911 when the firm’s largest production unit, the High Explosives Operating Department (HEOD) in charge of manufacturing dynamite, formed its own Efficiency Division. One of that division’s few successes was in the realm of paperwork. Its on-site “experiments in efficiency” led to two serious accidental explosions in late 1913, resulting in the deaths of ten workers (Stabile 381, 376-79). Before it was shut down in 1915 and its duties shifted to a Safety counterpart, the Efficiency Division carried out “a remarkable efficiency study of internal correspondence … around 1913” (Yates, “Emergence” 500). That study, which led to the report that T. C. du Pont would introduce in January 1914, included an exemplary contrast between a 118-word letter and a streamlined 49-word version. One is left to wonder why the study failed to enumerate character counts. In any case, as Yates summarizes, “With much of the information moved into the heading,” the same purpose was accomplished at “less than half the length” (“Emergence” 501-2). Not quite “ten words to his fifty,” but the parallels are clear.

The epigraph from du Pont, then, functions as a doppelgänger: Its similarity to Flint’s version of Imagist philosophy underscores the threat of indistinction faced by poetic theory and poetry itself in the face of ubiquitous rationalized verbal production. Finding new ways to distinguish itself in and from an increasingly saturated word-market—one with an increasing number of short-forms on display—became a felt imperative for many literary authors. Guillory’s history of “The Memo and Modernity,” while concerned almost exclusively with informational prose genres, includes a footnote that speaks directly to the relevance of this situation for poets: "In modernity poetry claims the right to be obscure, to resist ease of communication. This claim, I would argue, is not intrinsic to poetic discourse but is an effect of modernity's development of prose genres of communication" (125). Guillory is right, of course, that such a norm "is not intrinsic to poetic discourse" and that it can be usefully understood as a response to "modernity's development of prose genres of communication," yet we should not assent too quickly to the idea of *communicative resistance* as either a poetic norm or the new poetic norm in the first half of the twentieth century.

In his discussion of Spencer, Guillory refuses Spencer's attempt to incorporate poetry into his treatment of "the norms of brevity and clarity" by insisting on a hard and fast distinction between brevity itself and "compression" (125). Founding that distinction on a quickly-defined notion of "ambiguity" as "an impediment to communication," Guillory insists that "Spencer has confused" two quite different qualities (125). This move allows Guillory to relegate his own discussion of poetry ("the obvious counterexample" to brevity as clarity, for him) to the footnote cited previously. Marianne Moore, in an essay on "Humility, Concentration, and Gusto," uses language that recapitulates almost all of these terms:

> Concentration—indispensable to persuasion—may feel to itself crystal clear, yet be through its very compression the opposite and William Empson's attitude to ambiguity does not extenuate defeat. … I myself, however, would rather be told too little than too much. The question then arises, How obscure may one be? And I suppose one should not be consciously obscure at all. In any case, a poem is a concentrate … (125-26)

The movement of Moore's prose conveys its point that there can be no external determination of these questions. How brief may one get before ambiguity intrudes? What Guillory's history helps us see, then, is *not* the irrelevance of poetry's special relationship with brevity or of ambiguity to the "composition theory" that replaces traditional rhetoric. His essay's conclusion, after all, is that tight communicative norms quickly metastasize into bureaucratese. What it helps us see is that these influential textual-economic theories of writing present a shared verbal atmosphere. In that crowded air, modernist poets feel a burden to provide evidence that they are not engaged in the easily produced and regulated brevity-making embodied in genres such as the memo. Theirs is a different kind of "restless and successful labor in [a] calling," even as it converges with the practical business of the office in its distaste for figurative language and aesthetic ornament (Weber 94).

Moore's own thinking arrives at *self*-management ("a discipline imposed by ourselves") as the only path forward "in art, as in life" (130). This work-ethical sensibility was almost certainly more directly informed by her religious faith and upbringing in her family's Presbyterian manse (her grandfather was a pastor) than Pound's ethic was by his Quaker education and experience in the church his father helped found. Yet the links are firm. As she concludes her piece, Moore in fact turns to Pound, the "whole key" to whose work she describes elsewhere as "a neatening or cleancutness, to begin with, as caesura is *cutting at the end* (CAEDO, cut off)": "You recall Ezra Pound's remark? 'The great writer is always the plodder; it's the ephemeral writer that has to get on with the job'" (160, emphasis added; 130). Empsonian "ambiguity" may be one result of such plodding, thus serving as a sign that one's labors were not merely "ephemeral." But as Moore playfully notes, "one should not be consciously obscure at all." Ambiguity, in any case, will find a way: it "does not extenuate defeat."

Pound articulates his own thinking about these difficulties at greater extent in a number of letters written in response to queries about *The Cantos*. Here he is writing from Rapallo, Italy, in early 1939 to Hubert Creekmore, a young correspondent.[53]

> I believe that when finished, *all* foreign words in the Cantos, Gk., etc., will be underlinings, not necessary to the sense, in one way. I mean a complete sense will exist without them; it will be there in the American text, but the Greek, ideograms, etc., will indicate a *duration* from whence or since when. If you can find any *briefer* means of getting this repeat or resonance, tell papa, and I will try to employ it.
>
> … Abbreviations save *eye* effort. Also show speed in mind of original character supposed to be uttering or various colourings and degrees of importance or emphasis attributed by the protagonist of the moment.
>
> ALL typographic disposition, placings of words *on* the page, is intended to facilitate the reader's intonation, whether he be reading silently to self or aloud to friends. Given time and technique I might even put down the musical notation of passages or 'breaks into song.'
>
> There is *no intentional* obscurity. There is condensation to maximum attainable. It is impossible to make the deep as quickly comprehensible as the shallow. (SL 417-18)[54]

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[53] Earlier, in 1934, Pound writes similarly to Sarah Perkins Cope, "Skip anything you don't understand and go on till you pick it up again. All tosh about *foreign languages* making it difficult. The quotes are all either explained at once by repeat or they are definitely *of* the things indicated. If reader don't know what an elefant IS, then the word is obscure. / I admit there are a couple of Greek quotes, one along in 39 that can't be understood without Greek, but *if* I can drive the reader to learning at least that much Greek, she or he will indubitably be filled with a durable gratitude. And if not, what harm? I can't conceal the fact that the Greek language existed" (SL 250-51).

[54] These letters come shortly before Pound begins, in fall 1940, concocting and later announcing fascist, anti-Semitic broadcasts for Radio Rome that will see him arrested for treason by American troops in 1945. Indeed, the letter to Creekmore includes, alongside its portrayal of *The Cantos*'s difficulties as reader-friendly and its commitment to a bevy of international languages, moments of casual racism and explicit nativism.

Whether or not we are sympathetic to Pound's technical certainties ("It is impossible"), we can recognize how complexly a phrase such as "*briefer* means" functions in this discussion. His long "poem containing history" includes materials that serve as "underlinings" even though "a complete sense will exist without them," and this somehow does not contradict the pursuit of "condensation to maximum attainable." When Pound writes that "foreign words" are "not necessary to the sense, *in one way*," for example, that qualifying phrase speaks to the central tension at play. If "underlining[s]" and reducing "*eye* effort" are his *readerly* justifications for the poem's texture, his more intra-poetic rationale is that the layer of languages captures the "*duration*" across eras of certain truths or patterns the poem is treating at any given moment. The result is a textual simultaneity, as if by presenting a palimpsest of a particular truth it might come to seem universal not in spite of its history because of and through it. The mere fact that Pound can openly admit to including what he refers to as "in one sense" extraneous while also claiming to pursue "maximum" condensation is a governing tension in his work.

Pound's framing in terms of "indicat[ing] a *duration*" and being willing to "employ" other methods resonates with both Moore's trajectory from "concentration" to "concentrate" and Eliot's notion of the poem as "completed" only after the requisite excisions ("this passage won't do") from those "few judicious friends whose opinion the author prizes" ("Three Voices" 199). All three descriptions link the poem and its effects to the active work of making. The emphasis on the relationship between that "plodding" work and its result—the not-ephemeral Work—highlights the most basic contrast between the short poem and the memo. As Guillory cleverly puts it, "Individual memos are less representative of the genre in the very proportion that they are more interesting as texts" (114). While the memo may be "*filed*" for posterity, initially "it might have an audience of one, or none; it might be read once, or never" (113). If in some sense this sounds eerily like any number of small poems with their small audiences, the emphasis on filing for posterity and on "some hypothetical future reader" that inhabits the production of poems comes with certain entailments (Guillory 113). Apropos of such questions regarding audience, in May 1914, Irénée du Pont (brother to T. C. and a vice-president at the time) circulated an amendment to the DuPont report from that January, disputing its "naïve" conception of verbal efficiency:

> Laborious consideration to make the letter as logical and short as possible is warranted, if a letter is to be read by many or referred to many times in the future, but most letters will only be read once or twice so that it is probably better to dictate quickly rather than take twice the time to express the thought in fifty percent of the words. (Yates, *Control* 253)

One problem of brevity is here crisply formulated as a see-saw between writerly labor and readerly labor. These same economies of labor and attention prevail across genres. If one's memo will receive only a few glances for a few seconds apiece, it is hardly worth spending additional minutes trimming and tightening. If one's poem has an unlikely but potentially limitless number of readers, over the "duration," the calculus changes. The modernist "ideology" is this equivalence. Its poems are not attempts to "resist communication" but to communicate forever. Within a conception of literature as "news that stays news," the small poem is *a memo for many*. Its making then demands a kind of self-management (systematic, scientific, or otherwise) in order to make possible "Laborious consideration" without concern for whether a given work might require "twice the time," or far more, as one that is *not* as "short as possible." Like salvation, that manifold future is far from guaranteed, so in the present one's calling is to

"Only work." For many audiences, the resulting short poems are "hard" because readers must labor to intuit the parts left unstated by the author. For authors themselves, meanwhile, Rodin's demand entails another: "Always show your work."

4. The Modernist Work Ethic

Pound began discussing and recirculating "In a Station of the Metro" almost immediately after its first public appearance. An initial account of the poem's origins appears in his contribution to the regular one-page column "How I Began," in which authors and artists described their own beginnings for the popular London miscellany, *T. P.'s Weekly* (1902-1916).[55] Each 1913 issue of *T. P.*'s opened with a different self-portrait of the artist filling the entirety of page three, and by the end of February the column had "aroused so much interest" that the editor used it as a sales pitch for selling back issues in the hopes that readers would seek to collect the entire series (263). That year, notable contributors to this agreeable microgenre included the poet, publisher, and bookshop owner Harold Monro and the prolific essayist G. K. Chesterton.

Pound's installment appeared in the June 6 issue and was an opportunity for him to speak to a slightly different audience than that afforded by the small magazines in which he had been publishing poems and reviews to date. In Phillip Waller's estimation, "Dwellers in the expanding working-class and lower-middle-class dormitory suburbs were the chief sorts of readers" at whom the weekly was aimed" (88). Its second issue overall, published on November 21, 1902, boasted that “Within a few hours after the [first] issue of the paper 200,000 copies were disposed of” (58). As if worried their wording might be misinterpreted, the editors flushed out their self-coverage with dozens of testimonials, from the likes of George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, H. G. Wells, W. M. Rossetti, and A. T. Quiller Couch. Meredith writes,

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[55] O'Connor, an Irish nationalist and member of Parliament in the House of Commons from 1880 until his death in 1929, began his enterprising forays into what Matthew Arnold dubbed "The New Journalism" by founding and editing the half-penny *Star* in 1888. The *Star*'s enormous success derived in part from its focus on digestible articles, including those in O'Connor's own gossip column, "Mainly about People." See Waller, 81-90.

> We have entered upon the period of Democracy in Literature, and in default of critics to subject or direct the flood, one who stands up in the thick of it, comparable to London’s grand policemen, regulating the traffic mid-street, deserves, and will surely win, encouragement for his effort to maintain an orderly and elegant procession where the welter appears confounding. (58)

This sense of “welter” defined the journal’s structure. As a miscellany catering to a broad audience, *T. P.’s* content is necessarily scattershot, but each issue is a relatively compact 32 to 40 pages, and standardized features direct the “flood” in an attempt to ensure efficient allocation of readerly attention. The long front-page article is often broken up across multiple issues. The voice of “T. P.” pops in and out. And most importantly a bite-size approach to content consumption is encouraged by regular columns with titles such as “Cameos from the Classics,” “Nuggets of Opinion,” and “T. P. in His Anecdotage.” The journal even broke up modernist fiction, serializing Joseph Conrad’s *Nostromo* over the course of 1904. In all of these ways, it played to burgeoning middle-class anxieties about keeping up with the culture. The content veered scrupulously away from direct discussion of substantive economic issues, but it leaned into the class makeup and ambitions of its audience.

The very first issue included a rhymed ode entitled “The City Clerk’s Soliloquy,” in which the speaker advocates letting “business sleep” and praises the “calm” of the cigarette break (18). By 1913, *T. P.'s* pages provided a competitive textual environment of articles and advertisements geared toward an audience attuned to various stations of “symbolic” or “intellectual” labor. One encounters anecdotes about “Overwork” (“her insatiate appetite for work”) alongside ones about becoming a secretary (612). One finds discussions of typewriters, machinic, advocating “Universal Adoption for Home Use” as well as personals placed by typewriters, human, describing themselves as “very accurate and prompt” (725; 349, 821, passim). There are full-page adverts for both hypnotism (guaranteeing that “you can completely change the course of your career”) and its adversary, the famed Pelman Courses. The latter promised its users,

> by practicing … a few minutes every day, or an hour or so a week, in their spare time, they will develop such —Concentration —Ideation … —Business Tact —Personal Magnetism … Managerial Capacity —Initiative —Organising Ability … as to greatly increase their mental efficiency and to double or treble the income-earning powers of their brains. (723)

In numerous issues from the same year, there are shorter spots recommending “Horbro” collars, roll-top desks, and C-level luxuries such as tobacco strains named after job titles, from “Chairman” (“He who has it knows content”) to “Boardman” (“milder”), all the way down the office hierarchy to “Recorder” (“the same, but fuller flavoured”) (823).

Amid that more specified welter, the modernists’ drive to distinguish their own “word-work”—what Eliot calls the artist’s “fundamental brain-work”—from the kinds of writerly labor being performed all around them is easier to grasp.[56] We can visualize that drive, somewhat playfully, by comparing familiar images of Pound's head to a similar profile in *T. P.'s* advertisement for the "mind-training" Pelman course, which appears in the same June 6 issue as Pound's article (723). Because of what appears to be a quick-fix with respect to the page's layout, the Pelman drawing almost seems to suggest that the words from the column to its right are floating into the back of the gentleman's cranium only to be extruded from the face, then through the bracket and into specific monetary amounts (see Fig. 4).[57] The image, in any case, is one of modern white-collar efficiency by way of self-help.

Pound's photographic profile in 1909 captures the same posture as the Pelman advertisement but with a non-normative hairstyle (see Fig. 5). The drawn profile by Gaudier-Brzeska from a few years later, which the sculptor produced in preparation for making the *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound* (1914) and which would come to adorn numerous New Directions editions of Pound's writing, reproduces again that same posture from the same angle, but with facial hair in lieu of the suggestion of an immediate or practical payday (see Figs. 6-7). What these images of Pound as budding modernist share with the Pelman image is a high valuation of focused intensity. That drive toward hard "brain-work" is challenged, a half century later, by the headless torso front and center on the 1967 proto-punk edition of Pound's last selection of *Cantos*, the official version of which was rushed out by New Directions in 1968 as *Drafts & Fragments of Cantos CX–CXVII* with the predictable Gaudier-Brzeska drawing—that torso-less head—in dark purple adorning its own cover (see Fig. 8).

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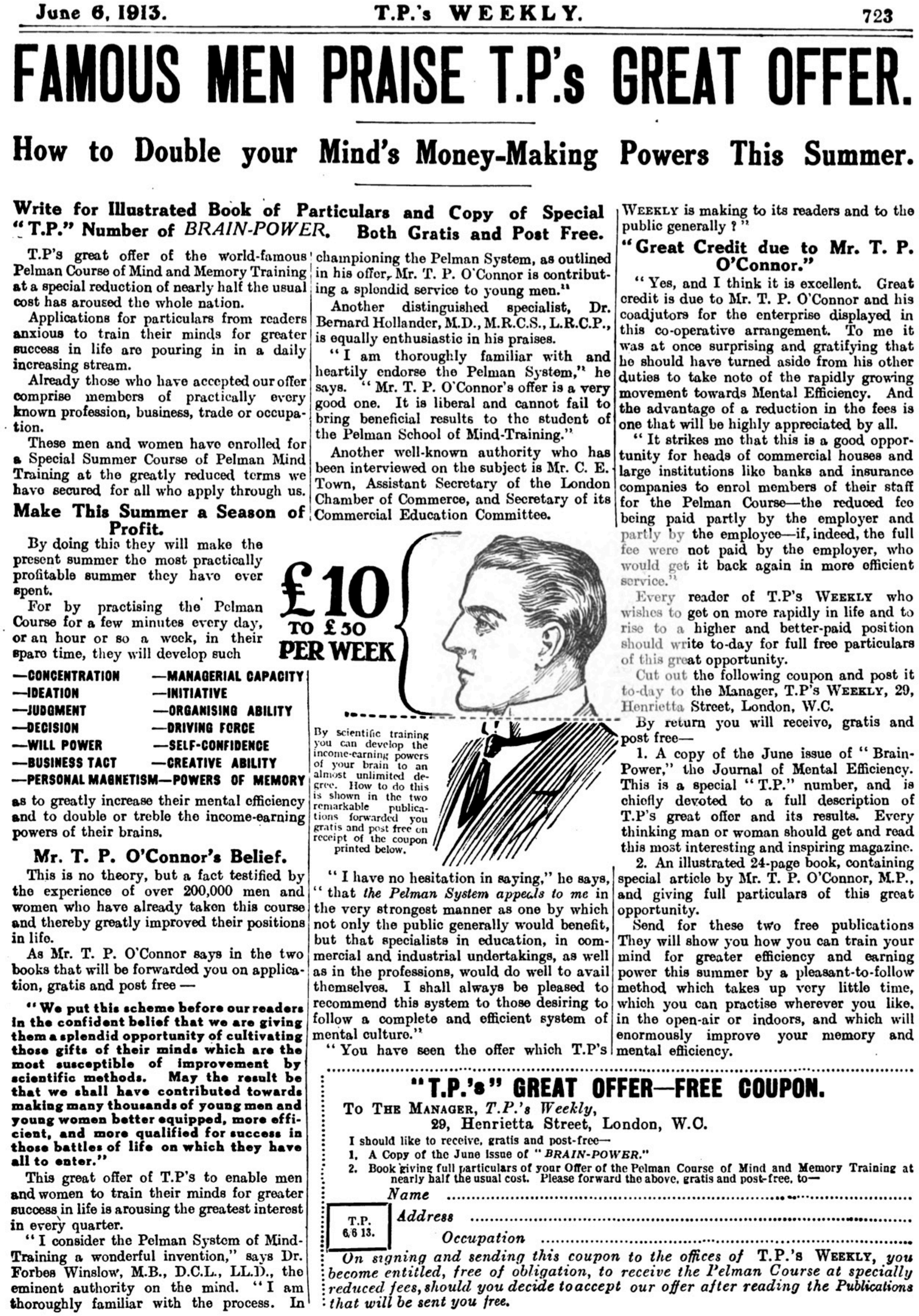
[56] *Complete Prose*, Vol. 4 133. Eliot is referencing a (published) 1881 letter from D. G. Rossetti to Hall Caine: "Conception, my boy, *fundamental brain-work*—that is what makes the difference in all art" (qtd. 136n13).

[57] Items afforded a full page in the June 6 issue include Pound's "How I Began" (707), Holbrook Jackson's "William Morris—Super-Craftsman" (709), a piece on "Literature as a Profession" (721), and the Pelman ad (723).



June 6, 1913. T.P.'s WEEKLY. 723

FAMOUS MEN PRAISE T.P.'s GREAT OFFER.

How to Double your Mind's Money-Making Powers This Summer.

Write for Illustrated Book of Particulars and Copy of Special "T.P." Number of *BRAIN-POWER*. Both Gratis and Post Free.

T.P.'s great offer of the world-famous Pelman Course of Mind and Memory Training at a special reduction of nearly half the usual cost has aroused the whole nation.

Applications for particulars from readers anxious to train their minds for greater success in life are pouring in in a daily increasing stream.

Already those who have accepted our offer comprise members of practically every known profession, business, trade or occupation.

These men and women have enrolled for a Special Summer Course of Pelman Mind Training at the greatly reduced terms we have secured for all who apply through us.

Make This Summer a Season of Profit.

By doing this they will make the present summer the most practically profitable summer they have ever spent.

For by practising the Pelman Course for a few minutes every day, or an hour or so a week, in their spare time, they will develop such

—CONCENTRATION
—IDEATION
—JUDGMENT
—DECISION
—WILL POWER
—BUSINESS TACT
—PERSONAL MAGNETISM
—MANAGERIAL CAPACITY
—INITIATIVE
—ORGANISING ABILITY
—DRIVING FORCE
—SELF-CONFIDENCE
—CREATIVE ABILITY
—POWERS OF MEMORY

as to greatly increase their mental efficiency and to double or treble the income-earning powers of their brains.

Mr. T. P. O'Connor's Belief.

This is no theory, but a fact testified by the experience of over 200,000 men and women who have already taken this course and thereby greatly improved their positions in life.

As Mr. T. P. O'Connor says in the two books that will be forwarded you on application, gratis and post free —

> **"We put this scheme before our readers in the confident belief that we are giving them a splendid opportunity of cultivating those gifts of their minds which are the most susceptible of improvement by scientific methods. May the result be that we shall have contributed towards making many thousands of young men and young women better equipped, more efficient, and more qualified for success in those battles of life on which they have all to enter."**

This great offer of T.P's to enable men and women to train their minds for greater success in life is arousing the greatest interest in every quarter.

"I consider the Pelman System of Mind-Training a wonderful invention," says Dr. Forbes Winslow, M.B., D.C.L., LL.D., the eminent authority on the mind. "I am thoroughly familiar with the process. In championing the Pelman System, as outlined in his offer, Mr. T. P. O'Connor is contributing a splendid service to young men."

Another distinguished specialist, Dr. Bernard Hollander, M.D., M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., is equally enthusiastic in his praises.

"I am thoroughly familiar with and heartily endorse the Pelman System," he says. "Mr. T. P. O'Connor's offer is a very good one. It is liberal and cannot fail to bring beneficial results to the student of the Pelman School of Mind-Training."

Another well-known authority who has been interviewed on the subject is Mr. C. E. Town, Assistant Secretary of the London Chamber of Commerce, and Secretary of its Commercial Education Committee.

By scientific training you can develop the income-earning powers of your brain to an almost unlimited degree. How to do this is shown in the two remarkable publications forwarded you gratis and post free on receipt of the coupon printed below.

"I have no hesitation in saying," he says, "that *the Pelman System appeals to me* in the very strongest manner as one by which not only the public generally would benefit, but that specialists in education, in commercial and industrial undertakings, as well as in the professions, would do well to avail themselves. I shall always be pleased to recommend this system to those desiring to follow a complete and efficient system of mental culture."

"You have seen the offer which T.P's WEEKLY is making to its readers and to the public generally?"

"Great Credit due to Mr. T. P. O'Connor."

"Yes, and I think it is excellent. Great credit is due to Mr. T. P. O'Connor and his coadjutors for the enterprise displayed in this co-operative arrangement. To me it was at once surprising and gratifying that he should have turned aside from his other duties to take note of the rapidly growing movement towards Mental Efficiency. And the advantage of a reduction in the fees is one that will be highly appreciated by all.

"It strikes me that this is a good opportunity for heads of commercial houses and large institutions like banks and insurance companies to enrol members of their staff for the Pelman Course—the reduced fee being paid partly by the employer and partly by the employee—if, indeed, the full fee were not paid by the employer, who would get it back again in more efficient service."

Every reader of T.P's WEEKLY who wishes to get on more rapidly in life and to rise to a higher and better-paid position should write to-day for full free particulars of this great opportunity.

Cut out the following coupon and post it to-day to the Manager, T.P's WEEKLY, 29, Henrietta Street, London, W.C.

By return you will receive, gratis and post free—

1. A copy of the June issue of "Brain-Power," the Journal of Mental Efficiency. This is a special "T.P." number, and is chiefly devoted to a full description of T.P's great offer and its results. Every thinking man or woman should get and read this most interesting and inspiring magazine.

2. An illustrated 24-page book, containing special article by Mr. T. P. O'Connor, M.P., and giving full particulars of this great opportunity.

Send for these two free publications They will show you how you can train your mind for greater efficiency and earning power this summer by a pleasant-to-follow method which takes up very little time, which you can practise wherever you like, in the open-air or indoors, and which will enormously improve your memory and mental efficiency.

"T.P.'s" GREAT OFFER—FREE COUPON.

To THE MANAGER, *T.P.'s Weekly*,
29, Henrietta Street, London, W.C.

I should like to receive, gratis and post-free—

1. A Copy of the June Issue of "*BRAIN-POWER.*"
2. Book giving full particulars of your Offer of the Pelman Course of Mind and Memory Training at nearly half the usual cost. Please forward the above, gratis and post-free, to—

Name ....

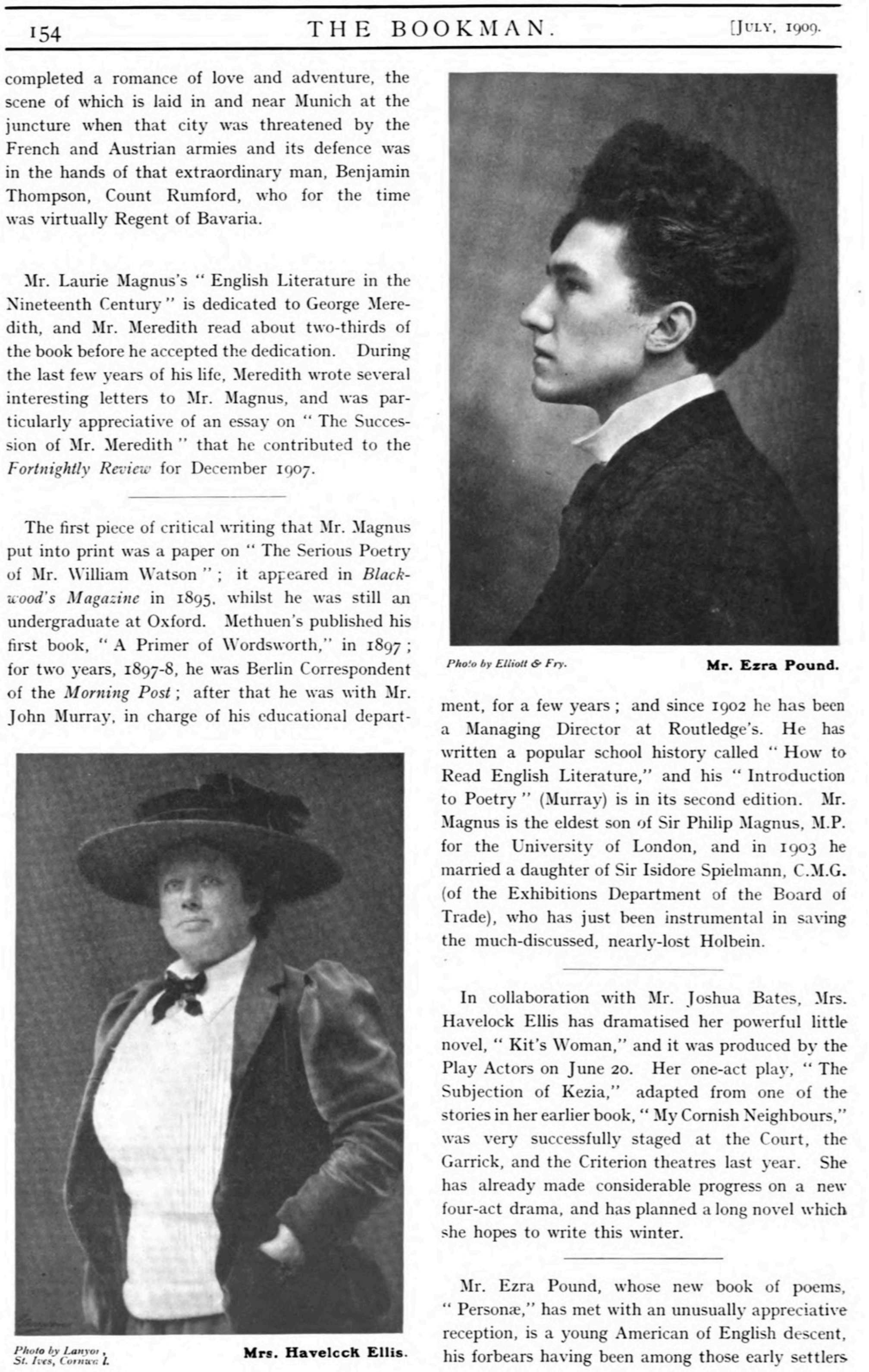
T.P.
6/6 13.

Address ....

Occupation ....

On signing and sending this coupon to the offices of T.P.'s WEEKLY, *you become entitled, free of obligation, to receive the Pelman Course at specially reduced fees, should you decide to accept our offer after reading the Publications that will be sent you free.*

Fig. 4. Gentleman in profile for Pelman ad, *T. P.'s Weekly*, June 6, 1913.



154 THE BOOKMAN. [JULY, 1909.

completed a romance of love and adventure, the scene of which is laid in and near Munich at the juncture when that city was threatened by the French and Austrian armies and its defence was in the hands of that extraordinary man, Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford, who for the time was virtually Regent of Bavaria.

Mr. Laurie Magnus's " English Literature in the Nineteenth Century " is dedicated to George Meredith, and Mr. Meredith read about two-thirds of the book before he accepted the dedication. During the last few years of his life, Meredith wrote several interesting letters to Mr. Magnus, and was particularly appreciative of an essay on " The Succession of Mr. Meredith " that he contributed to the *Fortnightly Review* for December 1907.

The first piece of critical writing that Mr. Magnus put into print was a paper on " The Serious Poetry of Mr. William Watson " ; it appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1895, whilst he was still an undergraduate at Oxford. Methuen's published his first book, " A Primer of Wordsworth," in 1897 ; for two years, 1897-8, he was Berlin Correspondent of the *Morning Post* ; after that he was with Mr. John Murray, in charge of his educational department, for a few years ; and since 1902 he has been a Managing Director at Routledge's. He has written a popular school history called " How to Read English Literature," and his " Introduction to Poetry " (Murray) is in its second edition. Mr. Magnus is the eldest son of Sir Philip Magnus, M.P. for the University of London, and in 1903 he married a daughter of Sir Isidore Spielmann, C.M.G. (of the Exhibitions Department of the Board of Trade), who has just been instrumental in saving the much-discussed, nearly-lost Holbein.

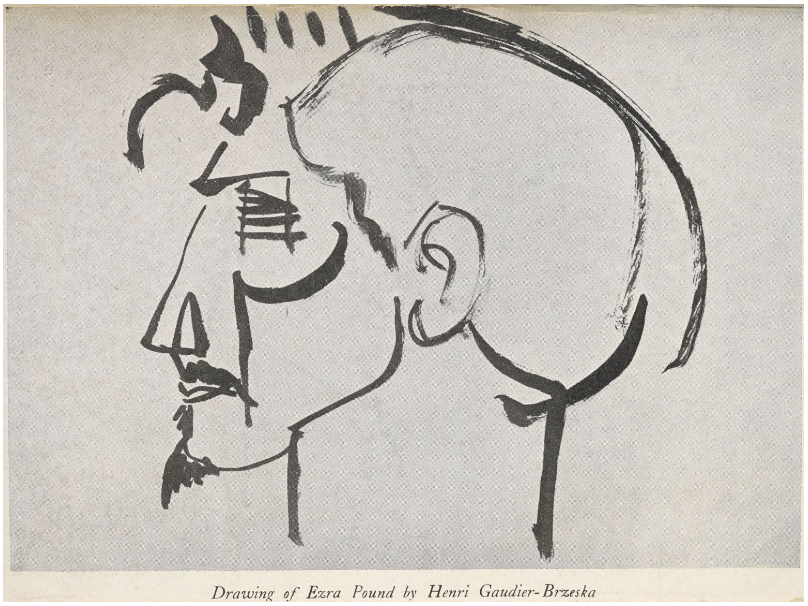
In collaboration with Mr. Joshua Bates, Mrs. Havelock Ellis has dramatised her powerful little novel, " Kit's Woman," and it was produced by the Play Actors on June 20. Her one-act play, " The Subjection of Kezia," adapted from one of the stories in her earlier book, " My Cornish Neighbours," was very successfully staged at the Court, the Garrick, and the Criterion theatres last year. She has already made considerable progress on a new four-act drama, and has planned a long novel which she hopes to write this winter.

Mr. Ezra Pound, whose new book of poems, " Personæ," has met with an unusually appreciative reception, is a young American of English descent, his forbears having been among those early settlers

Photo by Elliott & Fry. **Mr. Ezra Pound.**

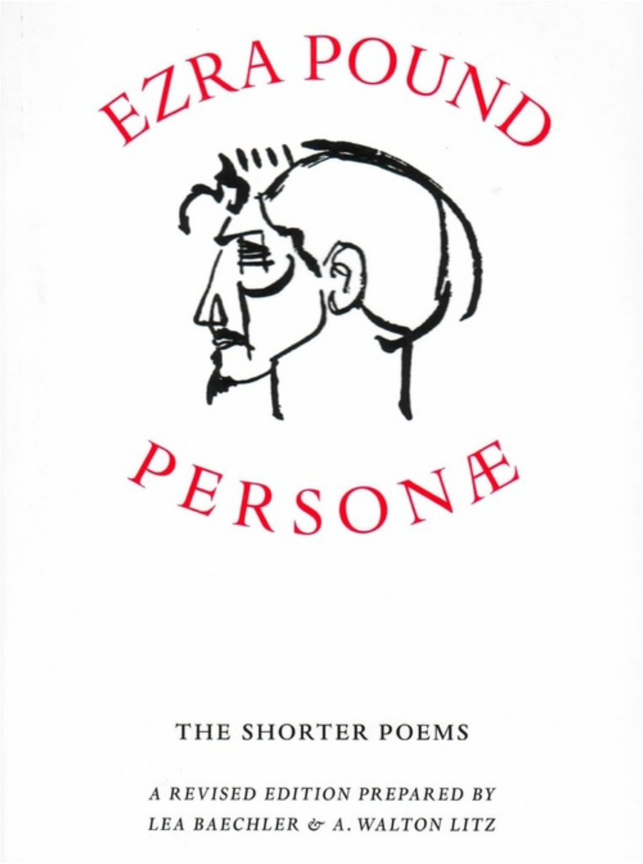
Photo by Lanyon, St. Ives, Cornwall. **Mrs. Havelcck Ellis.**

Fig. 5. "Mr. Ezra Pound" in profile, *The Bookman*, July 1909.



Drawing of Ezra Pound by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska

Fig. 6. "Drawing of Ezra Pound by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska" in Eliot, *Ezra Pound*, 1917.



EZRA POUND

PERSONÆ

THE SHORTER POEMS

A REVISED EDITION PREPARED BY
LEA BAECHLER & A. WALTON LITZ

Fig. 7. Sketch by Gaudier-Brzeska on the cover of *Personae* (1926), 1990.

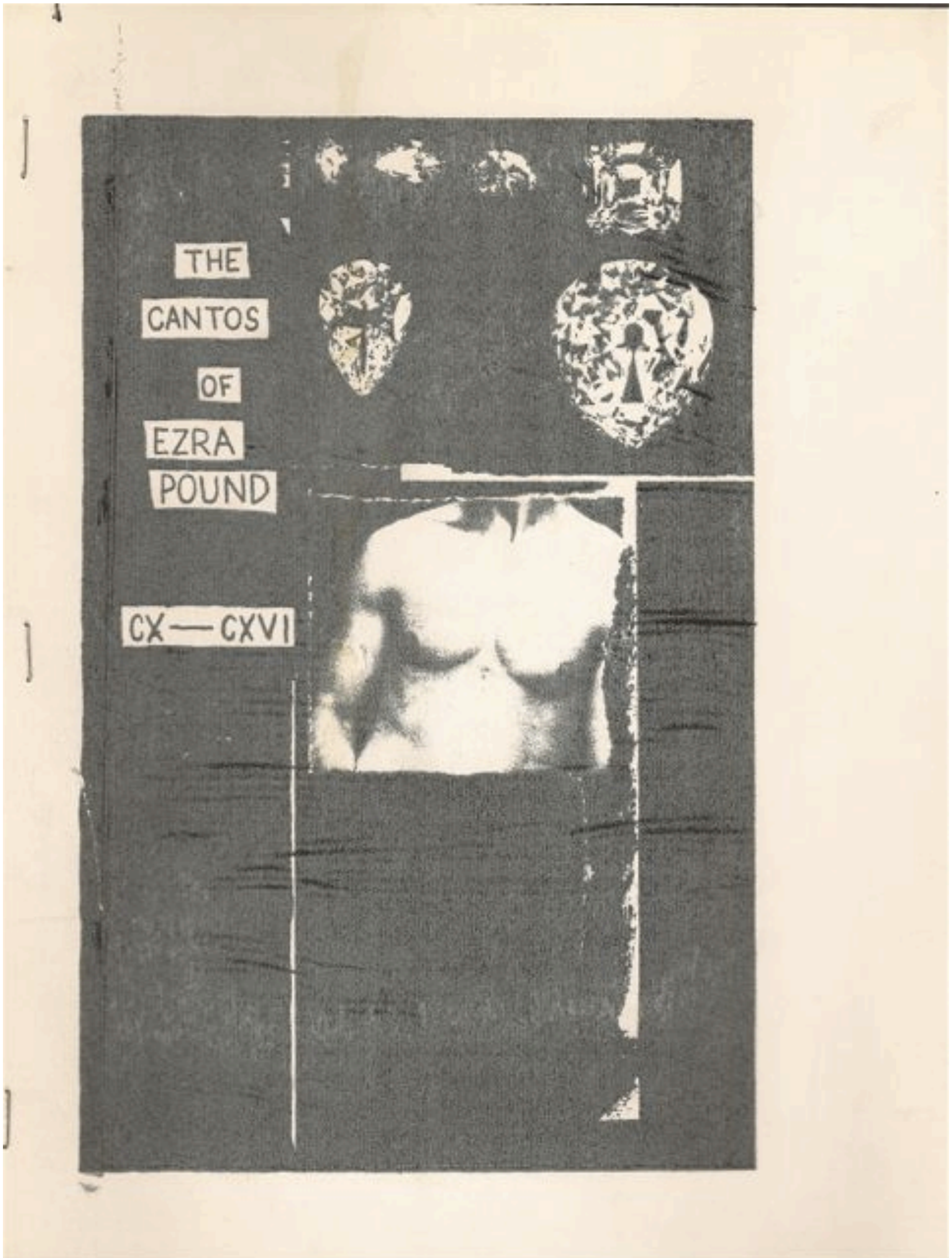

THE
CANTOS
OF
EZRA
POUND
CX—CXVI

Fig. 8. Headless torso on the cover of "pirated" *Cantos 110-116*, 1967.

If the cover of the pirated edition of Pound's late *Cantos* speaks to a post-WWII *resistance* to the poetic work ethic, which I will explore in my final chapter on Aram Saroyan, Gaudier-Brzeska's WWI-era drawing is, for the moment, a helpful guidepost as we examine the presentation of Pound on offer in *T. P.'s Weekly*. Under the heading "Affectations," the miscellany published a mostly positive review of *Ripostes* (1912) in February 1913, which likely paved the way for Pound's first byline a few months later on June 6.[58] That initial piece—Pound's "How I Began"—merits extended attention. The poet opens with an account of his publishing history, sounding quite like himself but perhaps also playing to the periodical's "down-market" audience (Watts 98). Pound notes having had only "one brief poem accepted" during "the first five years" and details his meager literary earnings: "Net result of my activities in cash, five dollars which works out to about 4s. 3d. per year" (707). He then shifts, in work-ethical fashion, to a clear declaration of calling. "I knew at fifteen pretty much what I want to do," he declares, and "I resolved that at thirty I would know more about poetry than any man living." A long anecdote about the construction of "Metro" concludes the piece. It differs in a number of small ways from the more widely available version embedded in the "Vorticism" essay published later in 1914 and is worth quoting in full as an example of the centrality of excision to his understanding of poetic technique as "a man's own responsibility":

> I waited three years to find the words for "Piccadilly," it is eight lines long, and they tell me now it is "sentiment." For well over a year I have been trying to make a poem of a very beautiful thing that befell me in the Paris Underground. I got out of a train at, I

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[58] The unsigned review was less favorably inclined toward the Hulme poems published at the back of *Ripostes*: "Mr. Hulme, say the publishers, 'achieves great rhythmical beauty in curious verse-form.' If form consists in the absence of form the statement may be correct, not otherwise" (236). Later, in early 1914, *T. P.*'s covered the Imagist movement, and Pound sent the editor a minor correction, which was published on March 20, 1914.

> think, La Concorde and in the jostle I saw a beautiful face, and then, turning suddenly, another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful face. All that day I tried to find words for what this made me feel. That night as I went home along the rue Raynouard I was still trying. I could get nothing but spots of colour. I remember thinking that if I had been a painter I might have started a wholly new school of painting. I tried to write the poem weeks afterwards in Italy, but found it useless. Then only the other night, wondering how I should tell the adventure, it struck me that in Japan, where a work of art is not estimated by its acreage and where sixteen syllables are counted enough for a poem if you arrange and punctuate them properly, one might make a very little poem which would be translated about as follows :—
>
> " The apparition of these faces in the
> crowd :
> " Petals on a wet, black bough."
>
> And there, or in some other very old, very quiet civilisation, some one else might understand the significance. (707)

Two instances of verbal brevity frame this account of laborious revision. Pound introduces the "beautiful thing" that befell him by way of reference to his own 1909 short poem "Piccadilly," which begins, "*Beautiful, tragical faces, / Ye that were whole, and are so sunken*" (*Poems & Translations* 101, hereafter LOA). And he concludes by suggesting that his experience in the Paris Underground has been more or less captured—finally—by his new "very little poem," recently published.[59] The reference to vast farmlands, meanwhile, hints at the standard association of "verse" with the Latin *versus*, which "originally denotes 'a turning' of a plough at the end of a furrow or the furrow itself" and by analogy "means 'a row' or 'a line of writing,' esp. a line a poet composes in making a poem" (PEPP 1507).[60] Virgil's *Georgics* (c. 29 BCE) is perhaps the most extended treatment of that association:

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[59] Most readers today would consider "Piccadilly" a ten-line poem. Pound's enumeration does not include the repeated half-line refrain, "Who hath forgotten you?"

> As Virgil's central pun on *vertere* (to turn) and *versus* (the furrow in the field and a line of written verse) emphasizes, the *Georgics* are just as much about the poet's careful labor of representation within a larger field of cultivating activities. Highlighting and reflecting on its own medium, in other words, the poem offers a complex meditation on the affinities and differences between the tending of words and the culture of the ground. It is no accident, therefore, that the *Georgics* are the most carefully wrought and densely allusive of Virgil's works or that John Dryden's 1697 Eng. rendition promoted them as the "best poem by the best poet." (PEPP 556)

Pound toys with a related "complex mediation" when he maligns "words [that] are shovelled in to fill a metric pattern" and affirms that "it is, on the whole, good that the [free verse] field should be ploughed" (LE 3). That particular association is, however, relatively infrequent in Pound's thinking. He tends to avoid the rural, generative, agricultural, and pre-industrial resonances of this well-worn metaphor when articulating his sense of poetic production. If he prefers analogies to science, industry, and craft, those analogies often function as placeholders (in "How I Began" and elsewhere) that allow him to remain most attached to a more general notion of literary work as "making." That generality leaves open the relays between the "careful labor of representation" and the "larger field of cultivating activities"—relays that had by Pound's time grown increasingly unstable as the motor displaced the plough as the predominant figure for work. That is to say, formulations such as Eliot's famous Dante-inflected description of Pound as "*Il miglior fabbro*" (Italian for "the better maker") or Pound's tentative "one might make" (near the end of "How I Began") reflect the "the affinities and differences between the tending of words," on the one hand (even as the role of the "hand" itself is increasingly uncertain), and modernity's various and changing "cultivating activities" taking place at some remove from "the ground," on the other (LE xii-xiii).

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[60] "By analogy, the word means 'a row' or 'a line of writing,' esp. a line a poet composes in making a poem. … The Gr. equivalent of versus is metron, 'meter' or 'measure,' which conveys the same suggestions of length and regularity" (PEPP 1507).

In his own emphasis on craft and cutting, Pound makes abundantly clear his distaste for mere "decorations and trappings" (which he associates with Virgil and Milton) as well as for the distance modernity seems to enforce between metropolis-dwellers and "the real" ground of experience (LE 217).[61] Yet in "How I Began," he does briefly entertain analogizing poetic production to something even less modern than agriculture. His opening clause— "I waited three years to find the words"—turns writing into a kind of gestation, but it is a *gestation of reduction* during which Pound labors to excise archaic diction, figurative language, and ornament from his practice. In a contemporaneous poem (from the "Contemporania" sequence), Pound writes, "How have I labored? / How have I not labored / To bring her soul to birth, / To give these elements a name and a centre!" (LOA 265). The formulaic obstetric metaphor (perhaps most interesting as a hybrid of American and British spelling conventions) is more active in the poem than it is in "How I Began," Pound's tale of his own birth as a poet. Yet these metaphorics are even less central to Pound's work than those of agricultural cultivation, and he discards them in the context of an anecdote of incessant "trying" (707). As he quips, the appropriate answer to the column's implied question (*So, how did you begin?*) is silence ("there is very little to be said about this matter") or excess ("it is much too long to answer, and the details would be too technical"). After all, "[t]he artist is always beginning."

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[61] Here is Pound speaking in 1914 of poems such as "The Seafarer" (1911): "I began this *search for the real* in a book called *Personae*, casting off, as it were, complete masks of the self in each poem. I continued in long series of translations, which were but more elaborate masks" ("Vorticism" 463-64, emphasis added).

Indeed, the dominant topos in Pound's poetry is rarely fertility or generation. Far more often it is rejuvenation or re-generation: something has been evacuated and requires the breath of fresh spirit.[62] The exceedingly odd description of his own poem, "In a Station of the Metro," as a translation of a hypothetical Japanese text reflects that emphasis. Pound offers that "one might make a very little poem which would be translated about as follows … And there, or in some other very old, very quiet civilisation, some one else might understand the significance." The tentativeness of the verbs is telling. The repetition of "might" serves to double-down on an atmosphere of possibility as opposed to certainty, to the extent that by the final clause it is unclear whether "Metro" is being read and understood in ancient Japan, modern Japan, or a world elsewhere. That atmosphere is quite different from the tone we associate with Pound's prose, but it is very much of a piece with Pound's insistent thematics of regeneration and transmission as opposed to pure creation or natural fecundity.

In Pound's account of "Metro," the delayed time of transmission is measured perhaps in ages, with respect to ancient Japan, and definitively in years with respect to the labor of making: "three years" for "Piccadilly," "well over a year" for "Metro." That timeframe, moreover, is related inextricably and inversely to each poem's small stature: "eight lines long," "sixteen syllables," and "very little poem." If that time period is at first implicitly presented as a kind of gestation period ("waited … to find"), when Pound turns to "Metro" it becomes clear that the labor is less that of finding or giving birth than that of craft. "I have been trying to make," he writes, and the long period of "trying" speaks to the work that has been done. Repetition ("still trying") further underscores the distinction between modernist making, with its emphasis on craft and technique, and an effortless birth framed in terms of inspiration.

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[62] Compare "For even as thou art hollow before I fill the with this parchment" ("Marvoil," LOA 97); "Listen to me, and I will breathe into thee a soul" ("N.Y.," LOA 234); "Thin husks I had known as men, / Dry casques of departed locusts / speaking a shell of speech … / Propped between chairs and table … / Words like the locust-shells, moved by no inner being; / A dryness calling for death" (*The Cantos* 26); and "I would know the dynamic content from the shell" ("How I Began" 707).

Marjorie Levinson's *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of a Form* (1986) can help us fix these terms with more precision. The historicist-textualist project initiated by Jerome McGann in *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (1983) functions as a critique of scholarly approaches to Romanticism that refuse to describe the investments and boundaries of the movement's self-mythologizations—particularly, in the words of Michael Fischer, the idea "that poetry can rise above the material circumstances that occasion it" (152). Building on McGann, Levinson targets one of what she re-describes as Romanticism's "fictional solutions" to real and perceived problems with respect to the literary field (e.g., the dominance of the novel) (215-16). The particular and particularly influential practice she highlights is the Romantic fragment poem: "The RFP seeks to erase the appearance of labor from the poetical work: to represent that work as a text, and that text as a pretext for the immaterial poem. This is to say that the fragment tries to erase history by resisting or concealing the referential operations of language" (229).

The foundational Romantic ideology, in Levinson's account, "is not so much the form's *mode of production* (Ruskin's explanation) as its *myth of production*" as perfect and labor-less, the critic's demystification of which "humanizes the RFP" in Levinson's view (230). Through careful description of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth poetic practices and certain field-specific motivations, Levinson resists the RFP's attempts "to cancel its identity as a work of art," urging us to "submit its 'modalities' to a removed critique" in order to "restore the form to the world of praxis and poeisis" (230).[63] Modernism raises precisely the opposite problem for its critics: Many of its most venerated practitioners insist, repeatedly and often dramatically, on each new text's "identity as a work of art." The modernist poet does not seek to "represent" her published text "under the fiction of disinterested, impersonal, *spontaneous*, and sincere creation"—a fiction that is, finally, a pretext for the ultimate "immaterial poem" (229-30, emphasis added). In a strikingly precise inversion, she seeks instead distinctly technical and material ways to present "the appearance of labor" via "praxis and poeisis" in order to invest the object on the page with an aura of autonomy *disconnected* from an absent ideal.

The "Why?" of this crucial shift has to do with the three "causal" tensions I nodded to at the beginning this chapter—an antipathy toward Victorian-era rhetoric, the ubiquity of managerial philosophy, and the specialization required by modernity's tendency toward functional differentiation. For our immediate purposes, however, the contrast between the Romantic conception of the "spontaneous" poem (skillfully teased out as "ideology" by Romanticists such as McGann and Levinson in the 1980s) and the Modernist one of the laboriously made work is worth underscoring by way of explicit contrast, whatever its origins and complexities.

A great deal of literary history of course takes place between what we now call Romanticism and Modernism, but it is precisely the substantial gap between 1800 and 1900 that makes the contrast between Coleridge and Pound so clarifying.[64] A direct juxtaposition heuristically exaggerates the key differences between their conceptions of poetic production, in part by rendering any complicating "residual" or "emergent" discourses outside the frame of observation, even if doing so risks engaging with what Raymond Williams labels "epochal analysis," as opposed to that which is "genuinely historical" (121-22, 67).[65] In contrast to Pound's description of his "experience" in the Paris Underground, for example, consider the second-half of Coleridge's account of "the genesis" of "Kubla Khan: or, A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment" (written c. 1797, published 1816), which the author appended to the top of the poem in its first publication (Lowes 356):

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[63] Levinson: "the RFP offers an utterance snatched from the abyss … [Its conflict] generates a form that organizes a deception, a form that sets its legitimate concern for achieving certain limited, real objectives under the fiction of disinterested, impersonal, spontaneous, and sincere creation" (229).

> The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation of consciousness of effort. On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found,

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[64] In "The Prose Tradition in Verse" (1914), Pound himself sketches some of this history. Quoting Coleridge, Pound alludes to a major transition from the quasi-miraculous conception of literary production (in the Romanticism of Coleridge and Wordsworth, at times) to the patient pursuit of "le mot juste" (in the Modernism of Flaubert and Ford Madox Ford) by way of late Victorians such as Swinburne and Christina Rossetti (LE 373). See H.D., *End of Torment*, 22-23, and McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (1993), 18-19 and 76-84.

[65] See Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (1977), 121-27.

> to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but alas! without the after restoration of the latter![66]

By the end of the note, the lost "immaterial" poem has overwhelmed the reader because the question this passage begs is unmistakable: *What if the man from Porlock had never come?* Coleridge's final gesture of lamentation ("alas!") serves as a moment of communion with that reader, whereas his "vivid confidence" implies the perfection of "the whole" and the proximity of that whole to the experience of pure and effortless inspiration.[67] *That* poem, for both the Romantic author and the Romantic reader (or Romantic ideologue, in McGann's framing), is the ultimate source of value. It ensures that of the remaining fragment—the few "instantly" composed "lines that are here preserved" and the "some eight or ten scattered lines and images"—the way unseen gold, tucked away in a vault, would come to officially ensure the value of British currency beginning with the Great Recoinage of 1816, the same year that "Kubla Khan" itself began circulating as a pale reflection of what that practical "person on business" (if "fictional," if a "symbol of Philistinism") had in effect mythologized by destroying (Skeat 79).[68]

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[66] Coleridge's manuscript note, available to scholars since 1962, is more direct than the published account: "This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed, in a sort of Reverie brought on by two grains of Opium, taken to check a dysentery, at a Farm House between Porlock and Linton, a quarter of a mile from Culbone Church, in the fall of the year, 1797" (Skeat 78).

[67] Byron echoes this sentiment in am 1820 letter: "I am like the tiger (in poesy), if I miss the first spring, I go growling back to my jungle. There is no second; I can't correct; I can't, and I won't. Nobody ever succeeds in it, great or small" (381).

[68] Allen Ginsberg's mantra "First thought, best thought" clarifies that Romantic effortlessness functions as a kind of episodic resistance to what I am calling the Modernist work ethic (372).

At first glance, the Romantic anecdote privileging vision and the Modernist one privileging work also seem to *share* certain features. Both writers recognize unavoidable problems with representation and language, and Coleridge's emphatic reduction of the gap between image and reality ("the images rose up before him as *things*") foreshadows the first principle of Imagism ("Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective"). Likewise, both writers include a moment of deference, in which they performatively undersell their work. Coleridge, in his note before the note, writes, "The following fragment is here published at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity, and as far as the Author's own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed *poetic* merits" (51). Pound concludes his anecdote in a similar manner. In the June 1913 version, he muses that someone somewhere "might" possibly grasp the poem's "significance" while demurring that "it is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought."[69] Finally, both authors emphasize an unusual and instantaneous experience as being at the root of the poem. For Coleridge it is that "distinct recollection of the whole" which he began to transcribe "instantly and eagerly." For Pound it is "a very beautiful thing that befell me" and later "that sudden emotion," "*that* kind of emotion," "my metro emotion," and, more generally, "the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective" ("Vorticism" 465, 467).

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[69] Pound's second formulation of this story was published on September 1, 1914 in *The Fortnightly Review* and reprinted verbatim in *Gaudier-Brzeska* (1916), his memoir of the young sculptor who died in World War I. This second and better-known account is longer, both as a whole—attempting as it does a general genealogy and description of "Vorticism," which did not yet exist in mid-1913—and in its specific discussion of "Metro." The latter is different from Pound's initial account in a number of respects. One striking difference not directly related to those I am elaborating in terms of length and effort is the contrast between the "turning" movement Pound attributes to himself in the first "Imagist" account—"in the jostle I saw a beautiful face, and then, *turning* suddenly, another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful face"—and the lack thereof in the later "Vorticist" one.

Crucially, though, for Pound it is not the poem, "whole" or otherwise, that comes to him, but rather a visual experience he describes in terms of color and painting. None of the "lost" drafts he describes, moreover, resembles Coleridge's ideal absent poem. They are not lost glories but *failed attempts* to capture the "precise instant" of his predominantly visual "emotion," and they are actively and intentionally destroyed. He begins with a longer poem written not in the moment or even on the day of his experience but "weeks afterward in Italy." The second version of his account increases the timeframe in rough accordance with the actual passage of time: "For well over a year" becomes, fifteen months later, "Three years ago in Paris …" But instead of a single Italian draft, Pound now hypostatizes a series of attempts: "I wrote a thirty-line poem, and destroyed it because it was what we call work 'of second intensity.' Six months later I made a poem half that length; a year later I made the following hokku-like sentence" (467). The increasing length and specificity of Pound's descriptions reinforces the central performance of dynamic and continuous mental labor. Sheer effortfulness—"and I tried all that day… that evening … I was still trying"—manifests as temporal measurement, increasing condensation, and the record of attempts. Pound, as his editors and biographers have noted, "once passed an entire year writing a sonnet a day" (*EP and Music* 12). The baked-in difficulty of deciding whether an exercise of that sort counts as a lot of work ("a sonnet [every] day") or as not very much work at all ("*a* sonnet"?) is partly to blame for the ceaseless making of failures, experiments, drafts, and revisions.

As Hannah Sullivan observes, the "thirty-line poem" to which Pound refers "has the rare distinction of being one of the few works described as 'destroyed' which has actually remained so. It has proved more common for early drafts which authors claimed they had abandoned or thrown out to resurface" (515).[70] That commitment to the trope of the vanquished early draft is somewhat less surprising when we recall that this was far from the first account Pound had given of abolished work. An early notice published to coincide with the release of *Personae* (1909), for example, takes great pains to highlight Pound's productivism. After recognizing that the young poet already "has two other small books of verse … printed in limited editions for private circulation," the piece asserts, "The smallness of his output does not indicate a barrenness or indolence, but that he has a faculty of self-criticism: he has written and burned two novels and three hundred sonnets" ("News Notes" 155). This insistence on prior labor or what we might call "background productivity" compensates for "the smallness" of Pound's output thus far in a manner that resembles the compensatory relation between the two-line "Metro" and its destroyed predecessors.

That the tensions driving these kinds of compensations were particularly acute with respect to "Metro" is testified to by contemporary critics, and, at the time, not only were Pound's poems in danger of being seen as insubstantial, so too were his books.[71] They were slim, decidedly limited-circulation affairs, and they contained, almost without exception, poems that were themselves notably short. Across all three books, a substantial number of pieces fall short of filling a single page, and only the rare poem spills over two. In the LOA edition, for instance, only *A Lume Spento*'s "Salve O Pontifex!" (not incidentally dedicated to Swinburne) and *Personae*'s "Guillaume de Lorris Belated" exceed that limit, each taking up three pages (50-53,

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[70] As far as I am aware the same is true of the "poem half that length," a slightly vaguer formulation that raises the possibility that the draft was the length of a sonnet. Qian points out correspondences between Pound's account and Marianne Moore's drastic cutting of her poem "Poetry," one version of which, in five six-line stanzas, is "virtually the size" of Pound's virtual first draft (71).

[71] Orage's review of the "Vorticism" essay in *The New Age* introduces "Metro" by teasingly multiplying Pound's anecdote: "and this is how, *after dozens of attempts*, he scores a success" (449, emphasis added).

91-94). The book-burning anecdote thus solves a problem. It is simpler to explain that the author has done much writing, even if not all of it is seen fit to preserve, than it might be to unpack slowly the intricacies of a poem such as “Piccadilly,” for instance, or the twelve-line “The Tree,” to demonstrate how much care and energy went into the condensing required to create the object.

Whether or not the book-burning anecdote was crafted by Pound himself and conveyed to *The Bookman* (which seems likely), it proved useful. It appeared at least twice more in American publications in 1909 (once as a direct quote of its first appearance and once without attribution but with “burned” replaced, delicately, by “destroyed”) and then again 1911 and 1913.[72] In a sense this kind of biographical recycling is commonplace, and it is always easier to tell someone that you have worked hard—or are working hard—than it is to demonstrate that work. Yet Pound’s repetition of concerns about “smallness,” “barrenness,” and “indolence” suggests the story of the destroyed work functions as more than a pure public relations gambit or exclusively “so my august progenitors are for the nonce contented” (*EP and Dorothy Shakespear* 181).

The success of Pound’s biographical clip contrasts neatly with the disappearance from the textual record of Flint’s effortless “device” of the incredible shrinking poem. Outside of its paratexts, though, how did “In a Station of the Metro” respond to the pressures suggested by the destroyed drafts, sonnets, and novels? From one vantage, the poem’s “final” brevity derives from the series of “textual condensations” Pound describes in his twin narrations of its manufacture (Riddel, “Decentering” 174). “One of the principal attractions of excision,” after all, “is that it works equally well as a method of editing and of *self*-editing” (Sullivan 504, emphasis added).

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[72] At least four of the numerous public notices of this “preliminary destruction” have been collected by editors: “burned two novels and three hundred sonnets” (*The Bookman*, July 1909, in Homberger 60); “‘burned two novels and three hundred sonnets’” (*Literary Digest*, Nov. 1909, in Erkkila 19); “destroyed two novels and some 300 sonnets” (*Evening Bulletin* [Philadelphia], Dec. 1909, in Erkkila 20); “the preliminary destruction of at least three hundred and fifty poems—it would be pertinent to mention that two of his novels were subjected to a similar fate” (*Philadelphia Record*, Jan. 1913, in Erkkila 57).

Of course the narrative nature of those two different tales means that such cutting and condensation is, in this instance, *reported* rather than materially "textual" and *utterly textual* inasmuch as a deconstructive historian might declare, "Texts are all we have and we can only compare texts with texts" (Ankersmit 281). Yet it is now commonplace in Pound criticism to recall that the historical record does provide multiple published and authorially sanctioned versions of the "Metro." Jerome McGann, in 1991 while calling attention to Pound's awareness of "the semiotic potential which lay in the physical aspects of book and text production," could still write (somewhat inaccurately), "One of his most famous poems—the imagist manifesto 'In a Station of the Metro'—has been reprinted and commented upon many times, but because scholars have not gone back to the original printing of the poem, none have recognized the extreme performativity of this text as originally conceived" (*The Textual Condition* 155).[73]

In the original 1913 version of the poem in *Poetry*, the spaced clusters of words draw out the reading process, in part by begging the question whether an encounter with this short poem—or perhaps all poems or even all texts—should be understood as a "viewing process." And with less to look at, we might look harder and begin to see the words as ink. Pound is certainly aware of the hybridity of the reading-viewing experience. Writing to E. E. Cummings about the visual strain caused by reading the blocks of prose poetry in *EIMI: A Journey Through Soviet Russia* (1933), he remarks, "The normal or average eye sees a certain width without heaving from side to side. May be hygienic for it to exercise its wobble, but I dunno that the orfer shd. sacrifice himself on that altar" (SL 245). If the "width" and pacing generated by the spaces in "Metro" slow down and perhaps "exercise" the eye, the rarely remarked upon use of color in the poem augments that effect. Although the poem implies the brightness and probable whiteness of both the petals and the faces, at the very least in contrast to their respective surroundings, the only color explicitly mentioned is "black." The word "white" is absent even as a page-whiteness is unusually present in the poem's "spaced" version. A portion of the poem's *frisson* is no doubt generated by the color reversals whereby a reader might momentarily link "black" to the petals before registering that petals are rarely black and that the poem clearly means them to be lighter than their bough, before then registering that, after all, the word "Petals" is indeed made of black ink, and so on.

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[73] Two scholars, Fogelman and Ellis, in fact published separate articles in 1988 that included a version of this "original" form of "Metro." Fogelman does not call direct attention the spacing; Ellis discusses it at some length.

Yet McGann is not at pains to explore whether "performativity" is or ever was the right frame with which to analyze the spaces of the poem. "The arrangement of the text's signs distinctly recalls Pound's typewriting habits," he rightly notes, "especially in the extended spacing before the final punctuation. Pound regularly left this kind of spacing before various marks of punctuation in his typescripts" and often placed two or more spaces between words (155).[74] He continues: "The point to be emphasized, however, is that he did not *regularly* carry this habit over to the printed texts. Pound himself (not Harriet Monroe) was almost certainly responsible for the performative typography … In any case, we know he took an active part in the physical presentation of his later texts." With that, McGann seems to have made his point: The spacing of the first version of "Metro" was intentional. Based on the available evidence in the letters between Pound and Monroe (cited previously) as well as the critical discussions of same, this seems accurate, almost inarguably so. Yet McGann declines to offer an explanation for the inclusion of the spacing. "In any case," indeed.

In defraying the question of why Pound did, in this case, "carry [his] habit over to the printed" poem, McGann unintentionally provides the best answer: The spaces function as proof-of-work. They function as traces or scars of the labor of the author at his typewriter at work on his poem, however small. “Metro,” with its extreme brevity and its absent grammatical subject, compensates for those lacks by activating the resources of the page itself. The gaps stand in for the absent “30-line poem” and the absent one “half” that length. McGann’s verb “recalls,” then, is decidedly too weak. If it is not quite right to say that the “arrangement of the text’s signs *are* Pound’s typewriting habits,” it is also not quite wrong. We have, in the spacing, an intentional trace of writerly labor. Positioning the various manifestations of “Metro” this way, in terms of the modernist work ethic, allows us to see how the poem’s faces, visualized as gaps, analogize both the grammar’s absent subject and the cutting done by an absent author. The spaced poem, as we have seen, did in fact strike some eyes of the time (1913) as trying too hard with too little and as calling undue attention to itself (i.e., over-performing). In a sense Pound’s most engaged critics were right. The spacing was the signifier (or performance) of the invisible “trying” Pound describes over and over in his two origin stories. The ethic or “ideology” of all that trying, as we have seen, at times occasions brevity even as brevity exacerbates the difficulty of “making visible” the trying that led to it. In order to limn some of the technical developments those tensions foster—before clarifying our existing answers as to *why* modernists placed such “a very strong emphasis on the labors of literary creation”—it will be helpful to examine, more briefly, the other poems Pound published alongside his couplet (Winders 75).

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[74] On Pound's approach to typewriting, see *EP and Dorothy Shakespear*, 182, and Kenner, 90.

5. Labored Rhythms

When it first appeared in the April 1913 issue of *Poetry*, “In a Station of the Metro” served as the conclusion to a set of twelve poems collectively entitled “Contemporania.” That grouping reappeared four months later in abbreviated form (with five pieces removed) in Dora

Marsden's London-based *The New Freewoman*. "Contemporania" has a strong case for being understood as Pound's breakthrough publication, and it has rightfully received a fair amount of critical attention.[75] In order to clarify the dynamics of the modernist work ethic and its relationship to brevity, I want to highlight just three of the sequence's technical features: its shifting modes of address, the three-beat rhythm that gives it sonic cohesion while also hardening individual lines, and the dynamic relations between its variously "classed" characters.

The conclusion of "Salutation the Second" (the eighth piece in the full arrangement of "Contemporania") sloganizes Pound's commitment to a volatile conjunction of productivity and unproductivity: "Say that you do no work / and that you will live forever" (LOA 266).[76] The poem is a one-page exhortation that opens as an address to the speaker's earlier books, written when he was still "twenty years behind the times." Halfway through, the addressee shifts to "little naked and impudent songs," which are depicted as appropriately contemporary: They "dance shamelessly," are likely to offend "the grave and the stodgy," and have the potential to "rejuvenate things!" The poem's closing mantra, then, would seem to offer, borrowing Kathi Weeks's updated phrasing, a bundle of "antiwork critiques and post-work imaginaries" in highly compressed form (5). If this utopian element is no doubt in play, Pound's poem nevertheless comes across as conveying, and requiring, a substantial dollop of energy. It is filled with bustling gestures and exclamation marks, and its shifts in address and proliferating series of rearguard victims (including reporters, professors, pretty ladies, Mr. Strachey, prudes, and practical people) generate a sense of crowded multiplicity. The opposition to "practical people" proffered by

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[75] Key discussions of the sequence include Fogelman (1988) and Brinkman (2002).

[76] Pound often dropped poems just prior to publication or republication, so the presence of "Salutation the Second" and "Metro" in both periodical versions of "Contemporania," as well as all editions of *Lustra* and *Personae* (1926), testifies to his sense of their import.

"Salutation the Second" is representative of the sequence in which it appears, and yet the form and energy of that opposition suggest it would be a mistake to read these twelve defiantly "contemporary" poems as advocating a straightforward bohemian critique of work as such.

Over and over, the poems "salute" themselves and their imagined audiences. Their shifting circles of reflexive address, in turn, express a complicated set of social dynamics. Openings such as "O my fellow sufferers, songs of my youth / A lot of assess praise you because you are 'virile'" enact self-critique by way of metapoetic recursion. Circularity of reference enforces a separation of the (current) songs from both their own past ("songs of my youth") and the surrounding verbal climate ("There is none like thee among the dancers; / None with swift feet"). This quality is ubiquitous (so much so that it became a target for Aldington's parodic pen), yet it is only infrequently a mode of self-critique and never one of self-consciousness or self-doubt. It is, rather, a process of autonomization and differentiation, which the sequence images in its parade of nearly closed spaces: "the crags," "The Garrett," "The Garden," "the lake," and so forth. One paradoxical result of repeated self-reference is that within "Contemporania" as a whole the distinctiveness of the individual poems comes to matter less than the proliferation *across* them of multiple voices and characters occupying a range of social positions. The poems then put that proliferation to use not so much by exploring encounters between differently ambiguated points of view but by underscoring the sometimes subtle relations between different social positions associated with lack or excess. Another, related result of this process (one I will not emphasize) is that by repeatedly referring to their own reception, the "Contemporania" seem to inscribe an audience into being.

The overall tendency toward involution formalizes itself in the sequence's most significant and enduring technical innovation: a loose three-beat rhythm.[77] Earlier, we identified that measure in the late-period line "the lócusts have gnáwed us with wórd-wòrk." It in fact appears irregularly in Pound's poetry prior to 1913 and carries on well beyond "Contemporania" into his two most influential book-length projects, *Cathay* and *The Cantos*.[78] But "Contemporania" is where the rhythm achieves its first full realization. Every poem in the series involves multiple lines exhibiting the pattern, and many conclude in a strikingly definitive trimeter: "and retúrn to thát which concérns us"; "the hóur of wáking togéther"; "And is álmost afráid that Í / will commít that índiscrétion"; "For yóu are no párt, but a whóle," "You wíll nòt láck your rewárd"; "Nów is a tíme for cárving. … Lét there be cómmerce betwéen us"; and so on. In "Salutation the Second," this signature pulse initially manifests in "so you fóund an áudience réady" and the syntactically awkward "do nót you disówn your prógeny." That Pound sensed the importance of this particular "free verse" rhythm is evidenced by the one revision he made before printing the piece in his collected poems. Perhaps for reasons of propriety, he excised a set of lines from the beginning of the poem that read as three stresses, three stresses, and four: "Wátch the repórters spít, / Wátch the ánger of the proféssors, / Wátch how the prétty ládies revíle them" (LOA 266). In *Personae*, they are compacted into one solidly three-beat line:

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[77] The phrase "three-beat rhythm" is useful because "trimeter" generally refers to verse that clearly allows for foot-based scansion and "triple rhythm" to lines composed of trisyllabic feet (e.g., dactyls and anapests).

[78] Both projects are ripe with examples. In *Cathay*, the pattern surfaces at crucial moments, like a background rhythm whose force is accentuated by remaining mostly submerged: "What flówer has cóme into blóssom?," "Who nów goes drúnkenly óut / And léaves her tóo much alóne," "And Í will cóme out to méet you," "And nów I see ónly the ríver" (LOA 249, 250, 252, 257). In *The Cantos*, which is far more variably measured, the rhythm is most prominent in moments of epic significance, subjective intrusion, or imagistic epiphany: "And thén went dówn to the shíp" (I), "'Lét her go báck to the shíps'" (II), "I sát on the Dogána's stéps" (III) "Pálace in smóky líght" (IV), "Whát have you dóne, Od´ysseus" (VI), "Táishan is atténded of lóves" (LXXXI), "I cánnot máke it cohere" (CXVI).

“Obsérve the irritátion in géneral” (LOA 1277). The substitution suggests that for Pound sustaining this chord was central to exploring the possibilities of the contemporary poem.

What then is the meaning of this rhythmic backbone? What is signified by its particular sound(s)? To begin with, we need to consider what makes the three-beat line distinctive. The cross-cultural tendency to group beats into fours—well documented in a seminal article by anthropological linguist Robbins Burling—means that if a five-beat line will sound “natural” because it prevents the text from falling into the magnetic grip of tetrameter, as Derek Attridge has argued, something different happens with three-beat lines.[79] The latter tends to elicit a line-terminal pause or rest where the salient “missing” fourth beat should be; that pause, in turn, serves to isolate the line as a unit. Rather than generating fluidity, then, trimeter often conveys a declarative tone (as it does in a number of poems by W. B. Yeats), even when individual line-units are neither semantically direct nor syntactically natural. In Pound’s work, a looser three-beat rhythm (rather than a regular or alternating three-stress meter) is associated with directness and immediacy. Yet it remains both pliable enough to avoid metronomic regularity and distinctive enough to have force even when intermittent.

As one of Pound’s highly “flexible technique[s],” the three-beat rhythm was also the primary sonic source of his movement toward a paratactic poetics (Miner 584). On occasion, critics have briefly addressed the presence and implications of trimeter-like sound patterns in Pound’s verse, most often in discussions of his predilection for certain types of classically informed line-endings (featuring a spondee, for example).[80] Recently, in “To Break the

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[79] Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry*, 80-96, 139-41. See also Burling (1966) and Hayes and MacEachern (1998).

[80] See Scott James as quoted in Eliot, *Ezra Pound: His Poetry and Metric*, 165; Kenner, 160, 491; Lincoln, 57; Stauder, 30; and Pound, *Cathay* 323.

Hexameter: Classical Prosody in Ezra Pound's Early *Canto*s" (2017), Orla Polten provides an excellent technical description of the rhythm. After noting Pound's somewhat surprising emphasis on "quantity" and "quantitative meters," she judges, with respect to drafts and sections of *The Cantos*, "There is a clearly audible pattern here of three beats per line; there is always a beat on the second and penultimate syllable" (269). Polten goes on to demonstrate how even Pound's longer, hexameter-like lines can often be analyzed as pairs of three-beat segments, and she observes the approximation of tetrameter achieved through the implicit pauses those segments elicit.[81]

Such pauses, augmented by features such as anaphora and exclamation, induce one characteristic quality of Pound's verse: a stacking effect, a partial fragmentation, an attenuation of the flow or relation between conjoining lines.[82] What we can call Pound's *line-based poetics* is the synthesis of these tendencies. A more specific, technical effect is what might be termed *lineal autonomy*.[83] That partial autonomy is paratactic, or even disintegrative, but is balanced by the openness of the three-beat rhythms Pound prefers. Those rhythms are loose "internally" inasmuch as they allow a high level of variability with respect to stress-placement and the number of unstressed syllables and are loose "externally" in that they function together as a sonic milieu rather than a description of each and every line. Hugh Kenner glances at these dynamics when he describes “the single line” as Pound’s atomic element of choice: “For when the single line is the unit of composition it must contain some minute torsion, something to justify its separate existence. Each line a little strange, yet each line clear” (219).[84]

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[81] Pound's strongest claims regarding "the sense of quantity reasserting itself" are found in "A Retrospect" (LE 12). On the analytic and experiential rationales for dividing hexameters in half, see Burling, 1440n15.

[82] In puzzling over a mid-career recording, one of Pound's best listeners intuits this rhythm. Sieburth writes, "Also particularly noticeable in these 1939 readings (especially in his recitations of his *Cantos*, less so with the quick-paced quatrains of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*) is Pound's tendency to emphasize his line-endings by a marked dip in his voice. The advantage here is that the listener can actually hear, clearly demarcated, each of Pound's end-stoppings (or mid-line caesurae); the disadvantage is that this kind of circumflex intonation of line-after-line (the voice rising toward the middle of the line then falling off again at its end) can become somewhat monotonous in its 'epic' or 'bardic' style of medieval chant—whose archaic sing-song, melismatic mode of delivery often seems at odds with the 'modernity' (or the 'factuality') of Pound's subject matter" ("The Sound of Pound" n.p.).

[83] Culler's discussion of the effects of trimeter in W. H. Auden's "September 1, 1939" (1940) rhymes with this notion of lineal autonomy (342-43).

Perhaps unexpectedly, the reflexivity and lineal suspension that constitute Pound’s early poems mirror the relations between the “classed” characters who populate them. The poetic speaker repeatedly presents himself in *suspended or partial relation* to other figures of ambiguous labor-status: fishermen on holiday, working-class children, and the rabble of the streets. “The Garret” is typical in locating both the speaker’s contemporaries and his contemporary songs in a liminal social space. He encourages his “kind” to “pity those who are better off than we are” while noting that “the rich have butlers and no friends / And we have friends and no butlers” (LOA 264). That class trajectory continues into “The Garden” (an imitation of the French symbolist Albert Victor Samaim). Its speaker differentiates himself from an unnamed idle lady of wealth, emblematic of “the end of breeding” (with that phrase’s pun sealing the point) and thus suggests his own weakly sympathetic relation to the finally inaccessible “rabble / Of the filthy, sturdy, unkillable infants of the very poor” (LOA 264). Simultaneously, the skill the speaker displays at making (social and lineal) distinctions serves to distance him from the street, whose occupants are an indistinguishable mass. Consider the conspicuous Latinate term on which the poem resolves: “She would like some one to speak to her, / And is almost afraid that I / will commit that indiscretion.” While “she” fears the speaker’s potential impropriety, he has in fact already drawn a whole series of “discretions” or separations. The abrupt (and only) appearance of the first-person pronoun at this moment suggests that its social function is in fact to make such distinctions—just as its poetic one is to make lines. The dangling “I” serves as the pivot of the text’s only enjambment. Until this break, the poem’s lines have coincided with its grammatical clauses. The “I” upsets that parsing pattern. At the precise moment it defines the social situation, the new pronoun also establishes its poem’s rules of versification (as grounded in sonic toughness rather than natural grammar). By breaking the line in the middle of a clause, it manufactures two three-beat lines, retroactively revealing the poem’s basic rhythm.

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[84] Sherry concurs: “the verse line, the unit of value and attention for which Pound’s place in the development of modernist prosodies is probably most secure, presents a particularly plastic, adaptable measure” (115).

In the miniature character-systems of “Contemporania,” participants fluctuate through partial identifications with and repulsions from one another. The “I” and his ilk, in particular, exist in a state of suspension between characters representing different types of labor and power. The speaker of “The Garden” remains suspended in the “almost” that dominates the poem’s final predicate and, typographically, in the enjambment of the penultimate line. Analogously, he is unburdened by descriptors in a way that makes his physical presence in the world of the poem less certain than that of the “filthy, sturdy” poor or the “anemi[c]” woman. As we have seen, the defined yet unsteady social world triangulated by these three subjects is then transmuted to the formal level by Pound’s three-beat rhythm, which holds the poem’s lines apart even as it assimilates them. If the average “Contemporania” poem constellates individual characters and lines in an attempt to map the work-dynamics of social space, then “Salutation [the First]” streamlines that geometry (LOA 265):

Ò generátion of the thóroughly smúg
        and thóroughly uncómfortable,
I have sèen físhermen pícnicking in the sún,
I have séen them with úntidy fámilies,
I have séen their smíles fùll of téeth
And héard ungáinly láughter.

And Í am háppier than yóu are,
And théy were háppier than Í am;

And the físh swím in the láke
        and do nót éven own clóthing.

Work hovers over this playful text. If the name of the "fishermen" is complicated by the narrative situation (a weekend holiday, say), the characters are still not exactly out of the office. Their labor-status betrays itself at the appearance of "fish" in the poem's final moment. These are fish-men of sorts, after all, and their favored relationship to nature is implicitly connected to the physicality of their line of work.[85] The title, from the Latin for "health," insinuates that this encounter is a source of physical vigor. Through their occupation and their literal position at the side of the lake, these families are closer to the source of true comfort than either the speaker or his addressee (itself divided into a simulated and uncomfortable "smug" audience and a "real" audience who might engage with the poem's assertions and techniques). In the final four lines, the poem's opening reflections reify into an explicit scale that prizes naked immediacy: An inverted chain of being moves from the animated natural world of "the fish" down to human society by way of "they," and then down to "I," and finally to "you" at the bottom. As in "The Garden," the predominantly Anglo-Saxon and Germanic diction ("untidy") is peppered with Latinate terms ("uncomfortable") in order to present the working-class subjects as closer to elemental language.

If the happy position of the workers is one of immediacy, the speaker's refusal to identify (more than partially) with that desirable position is an admission of his indirect experience of the physical world. The repetition of "I have seen" (and "heard") insists on an actual encounter, but it is an encounter with these families, whose own mediated relation to nature via the shirtless fish depends on the fishermen's work-life. That relation, in turn, provides the speaker's even more highly mediated access to the lake. As if to compensate for this *in*direct treatment of "the thing," the poem's grammatical rhythm returns with special force in the closing lines. The simple diction, anaphoric conjunctions, and rhythmic clarity serve to isolate the lines as autonomous units even as the thin logic of the chain links them together. As if to redress the speaker's status as an observer ("seen … seen … seen"), which is to say his suspended connection to nature and work, the text flaunts its three-beat rhythm in an effort to establish the solidity of the poet's enterprise as a maker of lines. The fishermen, in contrast, seem content to keep stowed the "lines" through which they usually transact with both the physical world and the market.

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[85] Bernes offers a gloss of this "artisanal" understanding of modernism, in which poetry is positioned by its practitioners as "a language of craft and things" and poetic labor is imbued with an "ethos of craft" (521).

Pound's reluctance to over-privilege poetic labor (by marking it as clearly physical or completely artisanal) is apparent if we contrast "Contemporania" with a slightly earlier treatment of these themes with which Pound would have been familiar. Yeats's "Adam's Curse" (1902) is best-known for the phrase "we must labour to be beautiful," uttered as part of a "mild" feminist rebuke of the male speaker (28-29). If that moment expresses the modernist work ethic with remarkable clarity, then the poem in full busies itself with the administration of a whole host of class relations. For Yeats's speaker, the effortful "stitching and unstitching" of lines is "harder" than manual labor (whether "scrub[bing] a kitchen pavement" or "break[ing] stones"). Yet it must *appear* effortless, even as it risks judgment as mere "idle[ness]" by the "noisy set / of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen." Poetic labor thus mingles the look of nonwork (which the poem links to white-collar work) with the actual toil of "an old pauper," all while insisting that "to articulate sweet sounds together / Is to work harder than all these." Despite its complexities, this labor-hierarchy does not entangle the poet in the middle, as in Pound's inverted chain of being, so much as situate him firmly up top.[86]

Rebecca West updates this framing in her preface to the abbreviated "Contemporania" published in *The New Freewoman*. If the diversity and frequency of occupational metaphors in Pound's writing suggest an anxious instability internal to the question of poetic labor, West captures that uncertainty in its most extreme form:

> Poetry should be burned to the bone by austere fires and washed white with rains of affliction: the poet should love nakedness and the thought of the skeleton under the flesh. But because the public will not pay for poetry it has become the occupation of learned persons, given to soft living among veiled things and unaccustomed to being sacked for talking too much. That is why from the beautiful stark bride of Blake it has become the idle hussy hung with ornament kept by Lord Tennyson, handed on to Stephen Phillips and now supported at Devonshire Street by the Georgian School. But there has arisen a little band who desire the poet to be as disciplined and efficient at his job as the stevedore. Just as Taylor and Gilbreth want to introduce scientific management into industry, so the imagistes want to discover the most puissant way of whirling the scattered star dust of words into a new star of passion. (86)

Like Pound, West connects the virtues of disciplined productivity to physicality. Direct bodily experience (bones, skeleton, flesh, nakedness, stark) of the natural elements (fire, rain) is set in opposition to the mediations of talk, veil, and ornament. West's framing of Pound's pursuit of immediacy is of course coincident with the general and long-running dispute with figurative language, the modern incarnation of which dates back at least to 1800 with Wordsworth and Coleridge's reappraisal of "the real language of men" as "a plainer and more emphatic language" than "what is usually called poetic diction" ("Preface to Lyrical Ballads" 171, 174, 178). By the time West authored the above paragraph, the villain roles were occupied by Victorian poetics, public rhetoric, and (a few months later) the "dishonest logic[s]" of liberal justifications for war (Sherry 16).[87] A generally anti-figurative sentiment certainly stands behind West's thinking.

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[86] See Pound's parody of Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1890): "Lénd me a líttle tobácco-shòp, / or instáll me in ány proféssion / Sàve this dámn'd proféssion of wríting / where one néeds one's bráins all the tíme" (LOA 294).

Yet her paragraph is also keyed to the ways Pound's early poems engage "the world of work as presently organized" (Mills 229). It fleshes out a picture of the background discourse of austerity and efficiency from which Imagism borrows, even as it attempts to distinguish itself from the same. The specific working figure that embodies bodily experience comes from the shore of the industrial world. West's "stevedore" echoes the fishermen, dockworkers, street urchins, and stone-cutters scattered throughout Pound's oeuvre. However, even as her paragraph and the poetry it introduces valorize physical work over and against the "softness" of the abstractions fundamental to the division of labor, West esteems the more abstract tenets of industrial management. Her analogies for poets, poems, and poetry reach a peak of instability when she compares the Imagists first to longshoremen, a comparison perhaps prefigured in the reference to William Blake, and immediately thereafter to "Taylor and Gilbreth," the deans of scientific management. Her goal is to underscore "efficiency," but the class incongruity of the passage reflects literary modernism's anxious preoccupation with the question of occupation. She sandwiches this unlikely pair of comparisons right between explicit references to the poets under discussion ("little band," "Imagists") as if the hybrid metaphor of worker and manager is at the movement's core. The ideal poet emerges as a *self*-managing combination of brawn and brain. The Imagists become both the post-production dockworkers at the literal edge of urban industrialism and the core theoreticians of industrial efficiency.[88]

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[87] We might note that by the time he published "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After" in 1886, Tennyson himself was explicitly against rhetoric and "overheated language": "Equal-born? O yes, if yonder hill be level with the flat. / Charm us, Orator, till the Lion look no larger than the Cat. // Till the Cat thro' that mirage of overheated language loom / Larger than the Lion, -- Demos end in working its own doom" (lines 111-14).

This dichotomy reproduces itself at a slightly larger scale in the passage's dramatic vacillations between the concerns of the workplace and the language of the Romantic sublime. It skips from the sublimity of reduction—"burned to the bone," "rains of affliction"—to the workaday—"occupation," "being sacked," "job," "industry"—and back again—"the most puissant way of whirling the scattered star dust of words into a new star of passion"—without pause. This dissonance reveals Imagism's obsession with the work-like quality of poetry to be a symptom of its tricky or quasi-magical qualities. West's rhetorically "overheated" cosmic-elemental representation of the Poet, with its series of five adjectives, reflects a distaste for the transition in production that began in the mid-nineteenth century and led to a universe in which, as C. Wright Mills puts it, "as a proportion of the labor force, fewer individuals manipulate *things*, more handle *people* and *symbols*" (Mills 65). West conveys not so much a desire to re-suture "words," symbols, and people to "dust," "star[s]," and things as a demand for a means of production that would equate all of these. Her paragraph imagines the modern making of poems as a thoroughly physical, "whirling" activity. Revealingly, it also balances the phrase "scientific management" with the ostentatious adjective "puissant" (i.e., "powerful"), which here functions, almost oxymoronically, as a near-synonym for "efficient." That loaded Latinate word captures the paradox of the imagiste: She seeks the most "puissant" way of doing something that is inherently (or at least apparently) powerless and inefficient because it is predominantly emotional and intellectual rather than physical.

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[88] Solomon discusses West's introduction with respect to Taylor and Gilbreth but does not address West's mixing of work metaphors (69).

More generally, West's formulations highlight that the *kind* of work that can serve as an appropriate comparison to literary labor is far less certain than is the sheer severity and self-disciplining such labor entails.[89] Apropos here is Eliot's well-known formulation linking professionalism to line-making: "no *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job." Both the importance of this claim and the instability it encodes are reflected in its publication history. The dictum begins its public life in quotation marks, when Pound *pre*-circulates it in a review of *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) as a means of using "Eliot" to critique Eliot: "But he came nearer the fact when he wrote elsewhere: 'No *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job'" (264). Pound would reiterate his own phrasing a few months later in the "RE VERS LIBRE" section of "A Retrospect," augmenting the reflexivity with an introductory clause, "Eliot has said the thing very well when he said, 'No vers is libre for the man who wants to do a good job'" (LE 12). As of that moment in 1918, Eliot had not yet "said" any such thing in print, but in his introduction to the British edition of Pound's *Selected Poems* put out by Faber in 1928, he would cite Pound "citing" him: "I remarked some years ago, in speaking of *vers libre*, that 'no *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job'" (Pound, *New Selected* 362). Nearly fifteen years later, in "The Music of Poetry" (1942), the phrase would finally lose its quotation marks and its French flavor: "As for 'free verse', I expressed my view twenty-five years ago [1917] by saying that no verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job" (*On Poetry and Poets* 31). The fluctuations that swirl around the core of "the man who wants to do a good job" emanate from the difficulty of pinning down this particular kind of job—the kind of job for which you must have “worked tirelessly” with much “emphasis … on discipline and form” while simultaneously insisting you “do no work” (Eliot *Selected Prose* 150; Pound, “Salutation the Second,” LOA 266):

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[89] Walter Benn Michaels's famous and thrice-iterated question—"What kind of work is writing?"—in *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987) takes on a particular inflection in my account (3, 28). The recalcitrance of "What *kind*?" suggests tautologies ("Writing is the work of writing," etc.) and thus calls attention to a pair of more rudimentary questions: How does writing comes to be conceived of *as* work? Why is it understood by modernists as *hard* work?

> But, abóve àll, gó to práctical péople—
> gó! jángle their dóor-bells!
> Sáy that you dó no wórk
> and thát you will líve foréver.

Stress falls paradoxically on the action of inactivity—“*do* no work”—as the poem heads toward its utopian-dystopian endpoint. *Ars longa, vita brevis* shrinks to “live forever.” One implication of this passage, and the larger rhythmic field in which it participates, is that Pound’s collection of “impertinent” songs need not work because the work has, as it were, already been done. Dora Marsden’s “The Art of the Future,” published in *The New Freewoman* just three months later, is illuminating in this respect:

> The difference [between poetry and prose] is one of brevity, completeness and finish simply because in poetry all the evidence of laboratory work is removed; the creaking of the thinking-machine is not there: *it has done its work*. Poetry… is brief because it is reduced to the exact equivalent: it has reached the completeness of knowledge when its dimensions can be expressed in a formula. (183, emphasis added)

The relationship between brevity and the modernist work ethic is audible in Marsden’s remarks, in that “creaking” that has already taken place and “done its work.” As Robert von Hallberg puts it, “The Imagist purge of poetic verbiage, as Marsden understood it in August 1913, was one part of that systematic effort [of ‘analysing terms’ and ‘tampering with names and ideas' in order to purify them]. Brevity as a stylistic feature was understood widely as a fit response to fakery in language" (68). Pound's "Salutation the Second" itself elicits precisely this type of reading: The professors and journalists come to seem emblematic of the kinds of verbal "fakery" von Hallberg names, and that he and Guillory historicize in different ways. One of Pound's poetic rebuttals to such sham-work is the "done" work of his hard three-beat lines, and the ultimate result of those lines is "Metro," which concludes his "Contemporania" and in *The New Freewoman* comes directly on the heels of "Salutation the Second." Pound's most famous poem seems almost to have been extruded from the sequence, making it definitional of the genre of "contemporary" poem, yet also so small and fragmented as to be somehow distinct:

> The apparítion   of these fáces   in the crówd :
> Pétals   on a wét, blàck   bóugh .

The rhythmic tendencies of Pound's poetry from this period clarify why the visually spaced "original" version of "Metro" is broken into two sets of *three* clusters.[90] They also account for the punctuation. The comma stamps the moment of the poem's greatest rhythmic complexity while the marks dangling off the end of each line visualize the "implied" beats readers often perceive after the final word of trimeter lines.[91] We now have a frame for "Metro" that accounts both for the spaces themselves—as signs of the excised "labor foregoing" narrated in Pound's accounts of destroyed drafts—and for the poem's tripartite arrangement—as typographically performing the three-beat rhythm of "Contemporania."

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[90] Guillory describes "the new demand that information would make upon the spatial organization of the page" around this time: "The shift from continuous prose to a graphically organized page is just as much a feature of writing in modernity as its degeneration into prolixity. So the memo replaced elaborate salutations with fields: 'To' and 'From.' This also is brevity" (126-27).

[91] Burling terms the perceptually salient moments at the end of lines like these "rests," while Attridge uses "implied beats," "unrealized beats," and "virtual beats." In Attridge's opinion, "unrealized beats occur only in regular verse (and, of course, music) once a strong rhythmic pattern has been established" ("Rhythm in English Poetry" 1035n5). My claim is that Pound's poetry is at times just regular enough to create an attenuated version of this effect.

Why, then, does the poem lose its spaces? If its original clusters of ink seem to enact West's call to "whirl[] … the scattered star dust of words," why does "Metro" close up around 1915? That time period would seem to be marked by *increased* fragmentation. It is when Pound and his peers began confronting not only the violence occurring on the continent but also the pro-war rhetoric on offer in the British public sphere. Indeed, in Vincent Sherry's account, Pound's construction of *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919) amid the verbal pressures of that discourse's "dishonest logic" leads him away from a reliance on the "climactic moment" or "minimal epiphany" (125), "the rhetorical fiction of a single speaker" (122), and the sense of a stable "form of the lyric 'I'" (127) and takes him toward "paratactic cadences" (125), "pseudo-discursive measures" (146), and greater fragmentation.[92] Sherry attempts to show how key aspects of *The Cantos* grew out of this shift, and in any case the era is almost certainly when Pound began work on what would become his notoriously difficult and typographically rambunctious long poem.[93] Why, then, did he not build on the discovery of the use of page-space enacted in the 1913 version of "Metro"? Why did the poem "close"?

The short answer is that Pound's three-beat rhythm is poetic labor fully realized. It is the "good job" done. Because that work of versification inheres so thoroughly in "Metro," the poem's compensations for its small size—in the form of the labor-signifying gaps—reveal themselves to be "superfluous." They are anomalous in Pound's body of work and can be excised—in a folding-in of the petals, as it were—as soon as they are recognized as such. The specifically grammatical excisions (of verb, comparative preposition or conjunction, and speaking or viewing subject) remain perceptible in the gap between the lines; so, too, the paratactic vibrations generated by the poem's foreshortened measures.

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[92] For Sherry, early Anglophone literary modernism responds to the war-era convolutions of "liberal rationalism" and "linguistic rationality" (16). Without disallowing that argument, we might posit the shifting "world of work" as a more appropriate background for conceptualizing certain pre-war literary innovations. That additional context is especially helpful with respect to Pound because Sherry's history focuses almost exclusively on Pound's mid-period, mid-length poems, which are far from his most influential works.

[93] Ewick notes, "the best evidence is that Pound's work on the poem we now call *The Cantos* began in 1915" (n.p.).

A fuller answer is that in his flexible and cutting cadences Pound finds a balance between two competing imperatives. If cutting itself is a central command of Poundian poetics, that command is mitigated by a number of interrelated commitments: to showing that work of cutting (to not eliminating all traces of work done); to sound as such (over and against the visual, as expressed in Pound's focus on converting his visual "Metro" emotion into language); and to the poetic tradition (particularly its range of approaches to versification). Those commitments find shared form in Pound's adaptable three-beat measure. Its quantitative character resonates with the need to demonstrate fidelity to the shared "profession" of versifying (dating back to the Greeks); its sonic nature provides a limit or backstop to purely visual experimentation; and its necessary length (which can only be reduced so much) and the sense of solidity it tends to convey allow it to serve as proof-of-work. This doubled tension—between commitment to brevity and a need to "show the work," between commitment to reduction and fidelity to the poetic tradition—lands Pound at the level of the line.

One way to understand Pound's line-based poetics is as a limit placed on the modernist drive toward reduction. In his history of early twentieth-century "quantum poetics" (in a book of that title and a later chapter, "Musical Motives in Modernism"), Daniel Albright mobilizes the discursive dissemination of developments in the sciences to frame the modernist pursuit of the fundamental micro-units of a given aesthetic practice or medium. His discussion of Pound centers on the poet's concern with "*absolute rhythm*" and that rhythm's basic "pattern-unit"

(*Quantum* 150; “Musical” 234). “Pound’s next candidate [for that unit] was the *hard bit*,” Albright explains, and somewhat later it was a “minimum unit of Time,” which Pound dubs, in a moment of self-historicization, “our minimum” (*Quantum* 151; *EP and Music* 316).[94] While focusing on the attraction of hypothetical “unsplittable atoms of rhythm” (153), Albright also notes Pound’s interest in fundamental aesthetic particles more generally, including “the monad,” the “primary pigment,” “some primary form,” “the point of maximum energy,” and, of course, “the Image” (*Quantum* 50-53; “Musical” 234). A shared concern for unit-seeking by the artists (especially Kandinsky and Schoenberg) whom Albright conscripts into his discussion animates the language of austerity we encountered in West’s introduction: the language of “skeleton under the flesh,” “stark bride[s],” and “the scattered star dust of words.” It also partially animates Pound’s own understanding of “Metro,” which Albright terms “the reduction-limit of a much longer poem” (“Musical” 234). Albright’s reference to the 1913 version of the poem in his book reflects his later claim that “always, when syntax is destroyed, all the burden of meaning tends to fall on small individual elements” (“Musical” 235). Yet his (unremarked upon) full citation, in that later context, of the “closed” 1916 “Metro” problematizes that claim by recalibrating the idea of a poetic (i.e., verbal-musical) “reduction-limit.” Here we can note how in Pound’s thought “cutting” generally carries a positive valence while the more severe reduction of “chopping” nearly always a negative one (“A Few Don’ts” 202). The first version of “Metro” tests the limits of brevity, excision, and fragmentation, and Pound finds it to have *slightly exceeded those limits*, forcing him back to *the line*—often suffused with a paratactic, stress-heavy rhythm—as his most reliable "individual element" and "pattern-unit." The result is the poem as we most frequently encounter it.

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[94] Albright claims, “As the work of art contracts, loses temporal duration and spatial extension, it approximates immateriality more exactly” (237). Nathan Brown, in contrast, explores how the rigorous pursuit of verbal contraction often confronts not only the materiality of language but “the larger field of materiality itself,” which is to say its delimitations by history and technology (2).

The balancing act "Metro" performs across its incarnations between the pursuit of absolute brevity in the form of "unsplittable" constituent elements and the effortful work of relation and aggregation is thematized in the numerical play of the poem's grammar. The comparison of the singular "apparition" (a condensation of the plural "faces," themselves positioned against an undifferentiated "crowd") to the explicitly plural "Petals" lining the lone "bough" conveys the core tension between worked reduction and worked extension.[95] Rather than leading to what Jacques Derrida calls the "breakthrough" of Pound's "irreducibly graphic poetics," the poet's encounter with his own reduction-limit in 1913 in fact reinforces his valuation of the not-quite-irreducible elements of rhythm and the line as grounding both the poetic tradition and the poetic breakthroughs demanded of the modern writer. In *The Cantos*—that "cryselephantine poem of unmeasurable length"—Pound harnesses his "graphic" impulses by relying on those slightly larger elements (Stock 184). In closing the form by removing the lax or too-easy spacing, Pound allows the first line to be seen as a grand alexandrine and both lines to be heard for their labored three-beat rhythms. The more particulate, explicitly graphic qualities of "Metro," meanwhile, would resurface only after his death.

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[95] That tension is recapitulated, at a different scale, in Pound's awareness that the drive toward brevity can conflict with the aim of producing longer works: "I am often asked whether there can be a *long* imagiste or vorticist poem" ("Vorticism" 471n1). Elsewhere he notes that one "problem" when beginning the project that would become *The Cantos* was "[how] to get a form—something elastic enough to take the necessary material" (D. Hall 38).

6. “(here represented by a blank space)”

Over the course of this chapter we have seen “In a Station of the Metro” grow gradually less fragmented. It shifts from the visual spread of 1913; to an untitled quotation awkwardly crammed among the columns of *T. P.’s Weekly* in 1914; to a strangely centered but more controlled printing in the *Fortnightly Review* later that year; to the pair of closed, justified lines harshly separated by a colon in the *Catholic Anthology* of 1915; and to the familiar 1916 version. This stepwise folding-in of the poem’s typographic petals, however, conveys not merely a sanding away of the idiosyncrasies and difficulties it presented to its first readers. What endures across these transformations—what is fully actualized by the *removal* of the superfluous spacing and the poem’s subsequent reliance on its self-sustaining rhythm, grammatical complexities, and thematic tensions—is one of the couplet’s two most significant “political” meanings: a deep-seated commitment to self-managed work.

The politics of Imagism, of which “Metro” stands as the key token, have generally been read in one of two ways. Critics such as Hugh Kenner, Donald Davie, and especially Helen Carr have emphasized the destabilizing power of the Imagists’ investments in free verse. For Carr, such freedoms, though embodied differently in Imagist philosophy and practice, are analogous to the loosening of restrictive social and cultural norms. She writes, “if some of those who formed the movement might later harden their views, and if the war had darkened all their hopes, it had been, for a while at least, personally and artistically liberating for the imagists, and for many of their readers” (880). Davie, in contrast, sees such loosening as a social danger: “One could almost say … that to dislocate syntax in poetry is to threaten the rule of law in the civilized community” (99). For him, such dislocations threaten norms of healthy public debate and reduce poetry’s efficacy as a moral force, particularly inasmuch as certain kinds of poems come to privilege aesthetics over meaning—having "an interesting mind" over having "an interesting thing to say" (104). Carr and Davie concur on *why* Imagism carries import beyond the realm of literature, even as they disagree sharply when it comes to the value of that import.

Approaching the political resonances of Pound's writing from a different angle, scholars such as Robert von Hallberg, Vincent Sherry, and Michael North argue that succeeding eras of Anglo-American modernist poetics may be most usefully historicized as critiques of the discourse of modern liberalism. They demonstrate how early twentieth-century poets mocked and engaged with specific contradictions inherent in liberalism, including its dependence on rhetoric and "fakery in language," "the contortions of the rationalist's language" it necessitated with respect to World War I, and its naturalization of the "hollow form" of abstract individualism (Von Hallberg 68; Sherry 22; North, *The Political Aesthetic* 2). In von Hallberg's account, for example, the virtue Imagist philosophy makes of using, as Marsden puts it, "the smallest possible number of words" carries an "antiliberal ideological significance," particularly in its resistance to "abstract terms" (68-69). The anti-liberalism of the era hosts elitist bigotries of all kinds, and it is linked in complex ways to "protofascism," but it also closely tied to "not altogether unattractive … derivatives of anarchist and syndicalist" thought (64). Von Hallberg claims that in his early poetry, specifically, "Pound's admiration and curiosity were aroused much less by the bourgeoise and upper-class British women who were advocating the suffragette cause than by the young *working* women who were making their way outside of marriage by selling only their labor" (73, emphasis added). These political calibrations are illuminating, and they serve as a useful corrective to readings of Imagism that stake claims on liberation as such.

My own corrective is somewhat different. "Metro," in particular, has become an Arnoldian "touchstone," and my account of it attempts to clarify the extent to which its success and significance derive from the way it managed to encapsulate the protective reshaping of the work ethic that took place as production itself transformed dramatically around the turn of the century. The poem's history reinforces Hannah Sullivan's claim that literary modernism helped originate the specific type of work we know as "revision" ("Modernist Excision" 504). More broadly, it discloses that modernism was a key participant in the more diffuse project of adapting the productivist mentality described by Max Weber to a world undergoing the shift from "*production as generation*" to "*production as conversion*" (Seltzer, "Writing Technologies" 172). "Make It New," Pound's most enduring maxim, emphasizes production while also covertly registering the obsessive repetitions engendered by the impossibility of pure origin.[96] In the apparently bizarre conclusion to his account of "Metro" for *T. P.'s Weekly*, Pound writes, "[O]ne might," he concludes, "make a very little poem which would be translated about as follows … And there [in Japan], or in some other very old, very quiet civilization, some one else might understand the significance" (707). This insistence that his haiku-like poem ought to be understood as a work of implied or hypothetical translation—a *conversion* or making-new across languages and cultures—fits neatly into the dynamic transition to a world in which more and more work can be understood as broadly "intellectual." Modernism serves as cultural attaché through that transition.

Of course, "Metro" long ago escaped this original context. It continues to circulate widely in the twenty-first century, free of any essential meaning, not only as an "anthology-piece" and a critical-historical node but as a kind of literary meme (Ferry 218). Still, the poem continues to secure the modernist work ethic because the amalgamation of the history of how it has been understood continues to reflect the productivist mentality that undergirded the creation of its significant form(s) and the tales told about its genesis. Consider an episode in Valeria Luiselli's novel *Faces in the Crowd*, published in Spanish in 2011 and in an English translation the following year. The book's protagonist explains that of the many "versions of the story" behind "In a Station of the Metro," the one she most "liked" has Pound "waiting on the platform" and catching a glimpse of "his friend Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, who had been killed in a trench in Neuville-Saint-Vaast a few months before" (15).

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[96] On the history of Pound's slogan, see North, *Novelty*, 162-71. "Make It New" might be taken as emblematic of artistic production as laborious "conversion": It demands the cyclic remaking of an unspecified referent.

> Shocked, Pound didn't move for several moments until first his knees and then his entire body gave way. Leaning his whole weight against the pillar, he slid down until he felt the concrete caress of the ground on his ass. He took out a notebook and began to write. That same night, in a diner in the south of the city, he completed a poem of over three hundred lines. The next day he reread it and thought it too long. He went back every day to the same station, the same pillar, to lop, cut, mutilate the poem. It had to be exactly as brief as his dead friend's appearance, exactly as startling. After a month of work, removing everything extraneous, only two poignant lines survived, comparing faces in the crowd to petals on a dark bough. (15)

This elegiac compound refuses to position "Metro" as merely a pair of "poignant lines" one might share or like. The poem that provides the novel's title is not merely a nice reference, a signal of the "creative life," or an advertisement for creativity in the abstract. Rather, it revisits one of the most enduring ideologies of artistry: In Luiselli's passage, Rodin's maxim—"Only work"—is not only the only means of producing compelling lines (e.g., "he felt the concrete caress of the ground on his ass"), it is also the only relief one might find from personal and historical suffering, from the death of a friend and the devastations of global war. This is the modernist work ethic in pursuit of “the certainty of grace” (Weber 79).

In its entirety, the fragmented and episodic *Faces in the Crowd* might be said to both embody and push back against the productivist logic of modernism, whereby more writerly work (“After a month …”) leads to less textual *work* (with “everything extraneous” removed by way of lopping, cutting, mutilating). More surprisingly, around the time that Luiselli would have been at work on her novel, a somewhat different version of Pound’s relationship to work was coming into view. The reappearance of the “original” spaced version of “Metro” in our millennium, I will argue, speaks to the poem’s secondary political meaning: a resistance to too many hours of “practical” labor. The setting of the first poem in Sieburth’s definitive edition of Pound’s *Poems & Translations* (2003) for the Library of America is revealing in this respect. That poem’s final lines read,

> Ne’er shall we feel
>   Aught of sorrow
>
>   Let light flow about thee
>   As   a cloak of air

“[Child of the grass]” originally opened “Hilda’s Book,” a hand-bound collection written between 1905 and 1907 that Pound gave to his then-girlfriend Hilda Doolittle (3). Annotations at the back of the LOA edition reveal that “damage … has obscured” the beginning of the only copy of that delicately handmade book and that both “light” and “air” are “probable reading[s]” (1255-56n3.15). More significantly, the “words between ‘As’ and ‘a cloak’ (here represented by a blank space) are illegible.” Sieburth states, “The present volume prints the text of ‘Hilda’s

Book' in *End to Torment* [1979]," as edited by Michael King. But that editorial claim depends on a specific notion of "the text" (1226). Here is roughly how the lines appear in King's edition:

Ne'er shall we feel
        Aught of sorrow

                        [. . .]

        Let light [?] flow about thee
        As [. . . ?] a cloak of air [?]

Compared to King's layout, Sieburth's is doubtless more fluid and less disruptive; perhaps "air[ier]." Yet because the gap between "As" and "a" reads (at a distance of over 1,200 pages from the relevant annotations) as an intended part of the poem, the edition it inaugurates offers us a poet slightly more attune to the space of the page than the one Pound's work reveals. Sieburth's inserted gap presents a moment of poetic novelty to which the phrase "a cloak of air" can seem to refer, reflexively, and thus makes possible a metapoetic reading of the page itself as just such a cloak. This reinvented young Pound seems to have already "modernized himself" sometime before 1907 (SL 40). The twenty-first century reader encountering this lightly updated modernist, in an era of digital screens that has a full tradition of visual poetry as part of its history, might find his work, even his earliest and most derivative poems, surprisingly amendable. In that respect, the editor's gorgeous re-presentation is to be commended.

Sieburth's silent update is also mildly deceptive, however, inasmuch as Pound's commitment to the visual integrity of the line is almost uniform across his career. Line-internal spacing shows up in Pound's work with surprising *infrequency* and almost exclusively as a means of emphasizing an underlying rhythm.

Has he témpered the víol's wóod

To enfórce   bòth the gráve   and the acúte?
Has he cúrved us the bówl of the lúte?
                    Láwes and Jénkyns gúard thy rést
                    Dólmetsch éver bé thy gúest
Hàst ‘ou fáshioned so áiry a móod
          To dráw up léaf from the róot?
Hàst ‘ou fóund   a clóud   so líght?
          As séemed nèither míst nor sháde?

The internal spacing in the second and penultimate lines reflects the passage’s three-beat rhythm. which contrasts with the clean tetrameter in italics (*The Cantos* 520). On those grounds, this excerpt from the *Pisan Cantos* (1948), though flush with music, rhymes neatly with the original “Metro” from thirty-five years prior. Yet that version of Pound’s “very little poem,” with its emphatically musical spaces serving as the signs or scars of poetic labor, is *not quite* the one that appears in the twenty-first century. Pound’s *New Selected Poems and Translations* from New Directions expands on the American publisher’s quite successful *Selected Poems*, which first appeared in 1949, and today, numerous reprints later, still includes the closed 1916 version of “Metro” without acknowledgment of alternates. The Sieburth-edited *New Selected*, in contrast, follows the principle of printing poems “where” and how they first appeared, and thus positions “Metro” among “Poems 1913-1915.” Sieburth notes flatly, “The spacing and punctuation of the poem’s first magazine publication are retained here” (289n), and while “are retained here” might be taken to imply the existence of a different setting, Sieburth never so much as mentions that later, authorially approved, and remarkably popular “closed” poem.

The rationales behind Sieburth’s editorial choices in the LOA and *New Selected* editions are surely variable. Reprinting “Metro” in its 1913 form answers the call to professionalism implied in McGann’s concern that “scholars have not gone back to the original printing of the poem.” It coincides with projects geared toward textual and historical recovery, broadly speaking, as well as with specific archival efforts (such as the Modernist Journals Project) centered on digitizing and making accessible the “small” or “little” magazines that collectively constituted one of the major platforms of aesthetic modernism. It might be seen as a way to position “Metro” as “speaking” to the traditions of concrete poetry, which grew increasingly prominent as the twentieth century unfurled, or to the screen-based reading practices of the twenty-first. It might even be perceived as an attempt to foreground the radicality of Pound’s poetics as a means of complicating, if not counter-veiling, the prejudices and fascism running through swaths of his writing. Whatever motivations we find most convincing for framing Sieburth’s editorial decisions, those decisions reinforce the Derridean, “irreducibly graphic” quality of the poet’s verse over and against his demonstrable commitment to the integrity of the line. In so doing, they spotlight a singular question: What exactly is “here represented by [the] blank space[s]” in Pound’s twenty-first century poem?

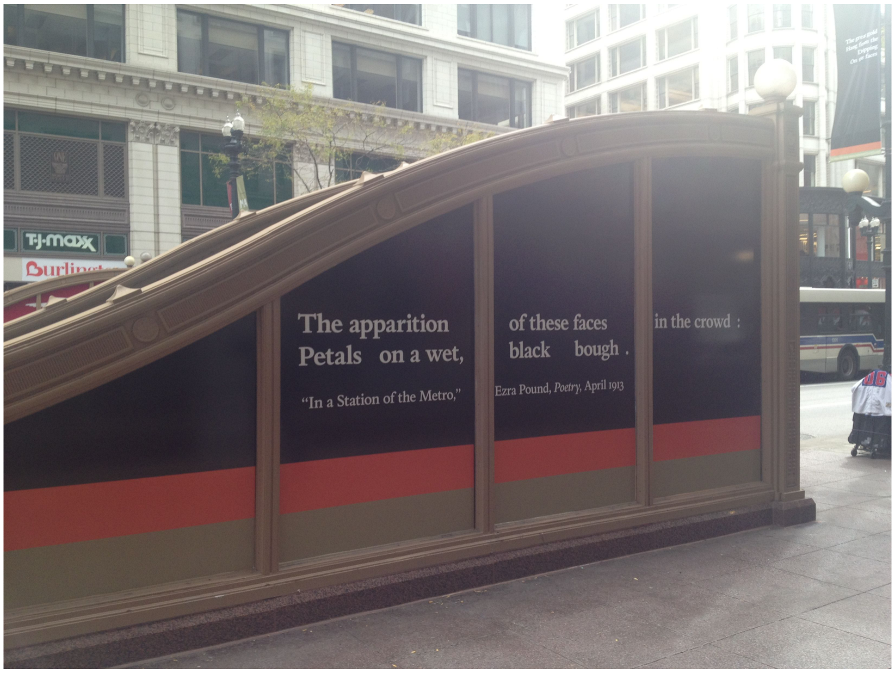
T·J·maxx
The apparition
of these faces
in the crowd :
Petals on a wet,
black bough .
“In a Station of the Metro,”
Ezra Pound, Poetry, April 1913

Fig. 9. “Metro” on the “L” in the Loop, 2012. (Credit: Poetry Foundation)

The public campaign "*Poetry* on State Street," launched in 2012, illuminates the counter-meaning of those fissures. Aligning with the publication of *Poetry* magazine's centennial anthology *The Open Door* (which, recall, begins with a spatialized "Metro") and the Poetry Foundation's more general project of providing free access to historical editions of the magazine online, the campaign placed poetry outdoors in Chicago's central business district, The Loop.[97] Though most of the campaign's banners wore excerpts, a few include short poems in full. "Metro" appeared on the side of the entrance to the Red Line train—part of the city's rapid-transit "L" system—located at the southwest corner of State and Madison (see Fig. 9).

This "downtown layout" of Pound's poem opens a number of interpretive avenues. Consider *Poetry*'s collaborator on this endeavor: the Chicago Loop Alliance (CLA), a membership organization that "manages and promotes high-performing urban experiences, attracting people and investment" in order "to promote businesses and lead revitalization efforts" ("About Us" n.p.). In 2015, CLA received attention after distributing brochures (under the misguidedly punning title "Change for the Better") that discouraged donations to panhandlers on the ground that such giving is "inefficient" (Matthews n.p.). As the Senior Counsel for the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless promptly pointed out in a sharply worded letter, that brochure campaign was not only "demeaning" in "target[ing] homeless persons in public places for special scrutiny" but also legally "inaccurate and misleading" (Heybach n.p.). CLA's "disdainful" campaign and the developer-friendly organization in general might be said to leverage and promote a rationalized version of the work ethic that undergirds the Pound poem chosen for the CLA-*Poetry* joint venture two years prior (Heybach n.p.).

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[97] For a brief history and critique of the establishment of the Poetry Foundation (which was incorporated on January 1, 2003), see Evans, "Free (Market) Verse" (2006).

Yet the resonant distortions of the “downtown layout” of “Metro” might also be said to query certain assumptions the poem elicits from many readers, including that its “Petals,” and thus its “faces,” must be white. As the photograph above shows, that billboard layout alters the poem in a few simple ways: It divides the text into three sectors, making possible a columnar rather than lineal reading; it inverts the color scheme of standard print typography; and it adds a gap between “wet” and “black” to accommodate the thin bronze-painted columns of the subway’s entrance. The collective effect looks like this when transposed back to the page:

> The apparition
> Petals   on a wet,
>
> of these faces
> black   bough .
>
> in the crowd :

Amid these shifts, the phrase “these faces / black” might conceivably be seen by a passerby as calling attention to the racial dynamics of Chicago, or even specifically to the Black “faces” who disproportionately make up the city’s working class and the labor force of the public transit system in particular.[98] Such readings are abetted and complicated by the situatedness of the posterized poem, which puts both social and textual pressure on each individual linguistic unit. Someone scuttling south on State might, after all, catch only a glimpse of Pound’s language, perhaps only the dangling phrase “in the crowd” whose colon in this re-spatialized version of the 1913 text seems to refer to the literal bustle surrounding it—seems, that is, to point toward and encompass the viewer herself even as she moves on.

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[98] A Chicago Transit Authority report calculates that its “total workforce” was over 65% African American in April 2009 (2).

That emphasis on the public quality of the final word of the poem's first line leads to my last claim, regarding the meaning of the text's fissures today: Even as it carries the ideological weight of an adjusted and modernized work ethic, "Metro" also bears a demand for a verbless stasis. Literally occupying the side of a portal to the underground, the 2012 "Metro" pulls us back to the poem's *mise en scène*. As Karl-Heinz Stierle reminded the members of the 1964 symposium in Cologne, "The Metro station is not the subject of the poem. Rather, it serves as a background—more precisely as the background of a background, the *crowd*."[99] When Pound was writing, that more distant setting was new enough, having opened only in July 1900, that he repeatedly places the colloquial shorthand for Le Métropolitan between quotation marks in his correspondence (i.e., "In a Station of the 'Metro'"). And not only the name but the lighting of that backdrop might still have felt peculiar when Pound was in Paris in 1906 and again in intervals from 1910 to 1913. The "vaulted roofs of hygienic white tile" of many stations, including La Concorde, were designed to maximize the minimal illumination—like that of a "shadowy closet"—available underground (Grescoe 8; Logan 343n27). In Pound's poem, the material wall of the train system stands behind the commuting worker-crowd, itself behind the foregrounded "apparition."

That the conjunction of bodies and machines that was the young Métro concludes Pound's set of *soi-disant* "Contemporania," in the form of his two-rail poem, is thoroughly appropriate considering how preoccupied those poems are with both class and production: "How have I labored? / How have I not labored?" wonders the speaker of "Ortus" (LOA 265). A "metro," after all, is that which mobilizes the spatially distributed workforce of the metropolis after which it is named. The commuter train at ground level, Paris's subway beneath, Chicago's

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[99] Stierle: "Die Metro-Station ist gar nicht direkt der Gegenstand des Gedichts. Sie dient vielmehr als Hintergrund, genauer als Hintergrund eines Hintergrunds der *crowd*" (Iser 502).

L overhead: At whatever height, these subsystems make up the vascular apparatus that daily converts a substantial proportion of the population from homebodies to laboring bodies and back again. In fact, Paris's citywide transportation system was bound up with its political-economic implications long before it began taking passengers. The pending Exposition Universelle of 1900 helped pull the project over the finish line, but the primary push behind it came from the needs of—and the need for—labor. As Susan Plotkin recounts, "decisions about the metro even took on the dimensions of a socialist 'class struggle': the needs of the poor workers of Paris defended by local councilmen were pitted against the rich bourgeois railroad barons, supported by the State" (18). The clash between stakeholders was resolved in 1895 in favor of the advocates for a transit system run by and for the city. The engineers responsible for the design, meanwhile, borrowed from the innovations of another underground communication system central to urban modernity: "[The Metro] was partly conceived, after all, by the same engineer, Jean-Baptiste Berlier, who invented the magnificent pneumatique network, a public mail system that sent rubber-tipped containers, driven by compressed air, rocketing through tubes beneath the streets" (Grescoe 8).[100] Alongside that flow of letters, the tubes of the new train system sent day-trippers, tourists, aesthetes, observers of the advertisements for modernity on display at the Universal Exhibition, and others. But their primary freight was the working class.

That fact was tragically highlighted just three years after trains began running. On Monday, August 10, 1903 just before 7 p.m., a short-circuit in the motor car of a train situated on Line 2 near Couronnes station began producing thick smoke. As the *New York Times* reported on August 12, the vast majority of the 84 people who died in the ensuing fires—most from asphyxiation due to smoke, heat, and overcrowding—were heading home from jobs located in Paris's northeastern manufacturing district:

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[100] See also Eugen Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle*, 70-71.

> The clothing of the victims indicated that they were almost entirely second-class passengers. … About 7 A. M. the bodies of ten women were brought out in a bunch. They had evidently been together in the female compartment, and had sought to escape in company when they were overcome. The bodies of two little girls and three infants were found with them clinging to their mothers. Many poor people claimed the bodies of their children and relatives, and tried to take them home, but the police gently but firmly insisted on the bodies being taken to the Morgue and barracks in order that the magnitude of the catastrophe might be determined. … The names and occupations of the victims give pathetic evidence of their humble condition. The names are characteristic of the French working classes, and occupations are given as painter, mason, plumber, tailor, seamstress, locksmith, &c. Aside from the workmen, about every third name is that of a woman. ("100 Dead in the Paris Disaster" 1-2)

At the very end of his half-chapter on Pound's "Metro," William Logan briefly posits this catastrophe as a possible context for an elegiac reading of the poem: "Pound had visited Paris in 1906, when memory of the fire would still have been fresh. Perhaps he had heard of it. The pale faces crowded along the platform might be an eerie reminder of those who had died underground" (191). At the time of the event itself, the train in question was located less than five kilometers (or, today, one transfer) from the La Concorde station that Pound cites as the site of the "metro emotion" he experienced a few years later. Though he seems never to have referred directly to the event in writing, it is as likely as not that Pound encountered the news. The catastrophe made the front page of American newspapers for a handful of days, and the issues it raised with respect to safety, technology, and transportation remained an explicit part of the public discourse for weeks. Whether or not we take the fire as a specific point of reference for Pound's poem, the broader trends its crystallizes—modern communication technologies, packed trains, working-class commuters—form the historical and sociological background (to the background) of that text. In this dim "Necropolitain" light, the gaps in "Metro" come to signify not only specifically poetic labor but labor-as-such (E. Weber 70). The poem's small compass and internal limitations, meanwhile, function as a symbolic critique of movement, and when the text is reborn 100 years after the Couronnes Disaster on the side of a Chicago subway entrance, its constellated form offers the possibility of unexpected moments of hesitation and friction.

What is perhaps the most amenable political demand Pound ever made (during a long career of demands) can help clarify the stop-work impulse buried in a poem that might seem merely to aestheticize a key space of modern labor. In the *ABC of Economics* (1933), he writes,

> I would be willing to set it out as simple dogma that the *shortening* of the working day (day of paid labor) is *the first clean cut* to be made. … Let the man work four hours for pay, and if he still wants to work after that, let him work as any artist or poet works, let him embellish his home or his garden, or stretch his legs in some form of exercise, or crook his back over a pool-table or sit on his rump and smoke. (20, 42, emphasis added).

Pound's bid to reduce the length of the working day by half initiates a series of proposals for overhauling the economy, and that "first clean cut" in fact appears in all five sections of Pound's treatise. Even for a public figure famed for emphatic reiteration rather than conceptual nuance, such repetitiousness stands out, as does Pound's uncharacteristic combination of clarity and generosity in expressing this "fractional" and yet "utopian" demand (Weeks 176). In fact, one of the few reservations to that demand that Pound considers revisits a familiar villain: "No one has claimed that [shortening the working day] would lead to the creation of more 'bureaus' and more bureaucrats, and more sassy typists to take notes of vacuous commissioners and sit on their obese laps in government offices" (*ABC of Economics* 54). Ultimately, then, Pound's core proposal in the middle of the Great Depression is not an attack either on superfluous labor or on leisure; it is a call for the redistribution of leisure-time. "This is not a theory of the leisure class," Pound insists. "It is a fact of leisure humanity (*i.e.,* civilized human life)" (103). Fewer hours of commuting to and performing paid labor would free up time "for what we will"—whether that be epiphanic experience, artistic practice, or vehement revision (Weeks 151). Borrowing a different term from Weeks's analysis of the work ethic as "extraordinarily persistent," and keeping in mind both the self-immolating drafts behind "Metro" *and* the workless stasis it extends, we can read Pound's best-known poem as advancing a variably "dissident" version of that ethic (82, 68). The most insistently made aspects of Pound's poem—its brevity, its rhythm, its gaps—signify both the difficult process of making and a pause in that process.

CHAPTER 2

Cyclic Cool: The Socialized Forms of Gwendolyn Brooks

1. Catchiness

In a review occasioned by the publication of Robert Creeley's *Selected Poems: 1945-2005* (2008), Stephanie Burt speculates, "For a spell during the 1960s, Robert Creeley's 'I Know a Man' may have been the most often quoted, even the most widely known, short poem by a living American" (20). Burt grounds this speculation, implicitly, in her wide-ranging grasp of twentieth and twenty-first century American poetries and, explicitly, in a series of pop-culture and middlebrow references to Creeley's twelve-line lyric: a novel, a film, a television episode, and a *New Yorker* article. Simultaneously, she delimits that speculation's purview to *short* poems. The adjectival hedge is in part a tacit acknowledgement that the most widely recognized poem by a living American in the 1960s was almost certainly Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1955). Ginsberg's 600-line poem was at the center of a widely publicized 1957 obscenity trial in the California State Superior Court covered not only by the *New Yorker* but by *Time* and *Life* magazines and later detailed in a 1961 nonfiction book and a 2010 film.

Yet in Burt's formulation there is also the suggestion of a non-trivial connection between "wide notice" and the formal quality of shortness (20). According to the kind of intuitive logic at work here, compactness and reserve make for easier uptake of both a piece ("most often quoted") and the entirety ("most widely known") of a text and may leave open more room for a wider range of uses by the distributor or recipient. This is one aspect of what, in a more intricately theorized formulation, Daniel Tiffany refers to as the "social function" of the cliché: "the scant meaning of a cliché gives priority to its social function, allowing it to serve as an expression, an index, of hidden social forces" (*My Silver Planet* 23). He continues, "The mechanism of verbal clichés can be seen as corresponding in ways to the operation of advertising jingles, but also to the deployment of commonplace phrases … and, at a formal level, to the device of the poetic refrain" (23). Though Tiffany is here concerned primarily with the excavatable "forces" carried by variously evacuated turns of phrase—notably, he later adds "stereotype" to the list elaborated above—his examples necessarily share certain family resemblances (50).[101] As exemplified by the adjective "scant," the descriptions of clichés, refrains, and kitschy verbal effects that we find in *My Silver Planet* repeatedly beg the question of scale. And if brevity is surely the most basic formal facet they share, widespread dissemination is necessarily a key resemblance among their overlapping micro-histories, as evidenced by the term "commonplaces" itself (50). Along these lines, we might posit that one deeply basic social function of shortness is its availability for wide-ranging circulation.

Both Tiffany and Burt approach, though never use, what might well be our most available term for describing "jingles" and all manner of jingle-like texts: *catchy*. The quality of "catchiness" is a helpful composite. It suggests both brevity and circulation, and it captures the crucial dual sense of the latter. A catchy piece of language has the potential to propagate widely, but it can also induce us to repeat it over and over, often by circling back on itself, as in the familiar experience of having a song lyric stuck in one's head.[102] Even in casual use, "catchy" can refer to at least three distinct domains: the formal characteristics of a piece (certain melodic or textual features); quantitative facts about the social world (a piece's actual or potential survival and spread); or competing aesthetic judgments, either positive ("I dig that, it's catchy") or negative ("It's so catchy—I can't get it out of my head"). That polyvalence is present in Samuel Johnson's definition of "catch" as "a short interval of action," which suggests the generality of the now dated noun-form of the term. The *Oxford English Dictionary* allows for a similar open-endedness: "A fragment or scrap of anything caught up." If finally *anything* can be catchy, there is nevertheless a distinct association with music in many of the term's uses today, when its most familiar application is to pop songs or snippets of such. That association is strong enough that the catch or jingle can be treated as the ground against which comparisons are made. Ian Bogost, for instance, in seeking an alternative to "addictive" for describing a core goal of video-game design, moves by way of analogy to "catchy songs" (133). Within music history and musicology, meanwhile, the noun "catch" can refer to a particular kind of repetitive popular song most prominent in the nineteenth century, moments of overlap in a round, or portions of a tune that are repeated like a chorus. In its descriptive coverage of both internal features (the moment of vocal overlap) and external effects ("so arranged as to produce ludicrous effects"), the musicological noun captures some of the doubleness "catchy" has in current usage (OED).

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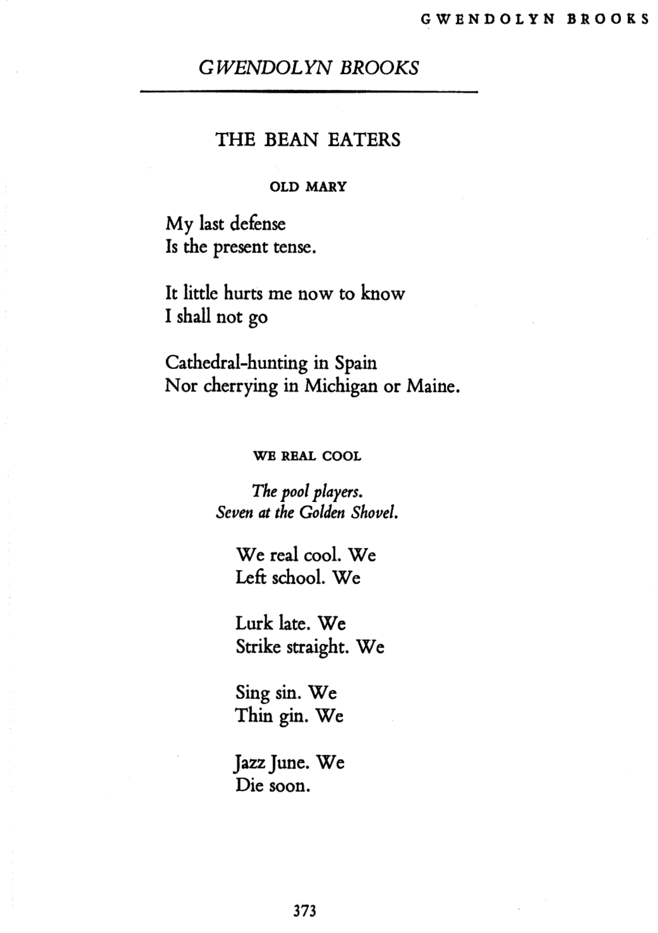
[101] See also Tiffany's related discussion of the "social function" of secrecy (*Infidel Poetics* 233) as well as his excellent summary of the commonplace book as "at once an aid to reading or memorization and a compositional tool: a notebook or matrix of sources in which poems could take shape" (*My Silver Planet* 50).

[102] On "catchiness" in relation to music, see Sacks, "Musicophilia" (41-48).

Meanwhile, the association between this cluster of terms and brevity has been even more enduring. Johnson's "short interval" becomes, for the modern dictionary, "a fragment or scrap," which is to say a small portion of a presumed whole, and the musical definition begins, "Originally, a short composition for three or more voices, which sing the same melody" (OED). Certainly, if a phrase's tuneful, melodic, or singsong quality may make it seem catchier and increase its odds of replication, so too will its length have an impact on its social afterlives. A short text is more easily reproduced and manipulated than a longer one. One of the key indices of shortness, then—one of the problems of shortness—is this ease of circulation, which allows for both happy proliferation beyond a text's original confines (one measure of survival or success) and unhappy oversaturation (leading to circular repetition, decontextualization, and the kind of evacuation described by Tiffany). A series of short skips will take us from "most widely known" to progressively more acerbic descriptors: catchy, popular, easy, gimmicky, glib.

If "I Know a Man" experienced this double-bind throughout and, to a lesser extent, after the 1960s, Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool," has been even more enduringly and variously catchy. Although Brooks (1917-2000), Creeley (1926-2005), and Ginsberg (1926-1997) are no longer alive, Brooks has a stronger claim than most of her peers to having written "the most widely known" short poem published since 1945 by any American. First appearing in *Poetry* magazine in Brooks's hometown of Chicago in September 1959, "We Real Cool" rapidly became the poet's best-known work. In this first incarnation, the poem seems acutely small; its short lines mean that even a relatively small poem like the six-line "Old Mary" still looms over it on the open page (see Fig. 10).

The poetry scenes emerging in the late 1950s undoubtedly played roles in the poem's eventual popularity, although not all of those roles were necessarily supportive. Broadly speaking, the poem appeared during what was in many ways a boomtime for American poetry. It was published a few years after both Ginsberg's *Howl* and Creeley's "I Know a Man" but in the same September as Robert Lowell's influential *Life Studies*. That month, M. H. Rosenthal—the book critic for *The Nation* who would, a decade later, review Brooks's *In the Mecca* for the *New York Times*—reviewed Lowell's book and offered up what would become a dominant framework for describing poems that seem to engage intimate aspects of the author's own "personal" life with "uncompromising honesty" (154). Deploying phrases such as "Poetry as Confession," "the most naked kind of confession," "the confessional," and "these confessions," Rosenthal named and helped midwife the new school of confessional poetry (154-55). The following year saw the speech in which Lowell used the phrase "the raw and the cooked" to distinguish the poetic underground of the Beats from the relatively polished verse more popular in academic settings at the time, and it saw the publication of Donald Allen's "fountainhead of radical poetics," *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* (Perloff 104).



GWENDOLYN BROOKS

GWENDOLYN BROOKS

THE BEAN EATERS

OLD MARY

My last defense
Is the present tense.

It little hurts me now to know
I shall not go

Cathedral-hunting in Spain
Nor cherrying in Michigan or Maine.

WE REAL COOL

The pool players.
Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

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Fig. 10. Brooks, "We Real Cool," *Poetry*, Sept. 1959.

Simultaneously, these overlapping poetry worlds were impacted by and complicit in the legalized segregation and overt racism of the Jim Crow era. Brooks notes that her own publication history represents a substantial "exception" (Angle 17). Speaking in 1967 with historian Paul Angle, Brooks cites Karl Shapiro's introduction to Melvin Tolson's *Harlem Gallery* anthology: "One of the rules of the poetic establishment is that Negroes are not admitted to the polite company of the anthology. Poetry as we know it remains the most lily-white of the arts" (17). Although Brooks received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1950 for her second collection, *Annie Allen* (1949), she was the first poet of color to win the award, and Black poets were consistently underrepresented in all matter of venues. *The New American Poetry* contained only one Black author (LeRoi Jones, later Amiri Baraka); Bob Kaufman remained a decidedly underground figure; and Brooks and Lorenzo Thomas were the only Black poets featured on a popular recording symbolic of the field's relationship to the nation: *Of Poetry and Power: Poems Occasioned by the Presidency and by the Death of John F. Kennedy* (1965). These examples reflect the dearth of mainstream attention paid to poets of color throughout the period spanning from the end of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s to the "lily-white" scenes and anthologies of the 1960s. Scholars such as Robert Bone, B. J. Bolden, Elizabeth Schlabach, and Jacqueline Goldsby have documented the importance of a slightly later rebirth, "The Chicago Black Renaissance," which took place during that long span of neglect. Building off research on Richard Wright's time in Chicago, they have delineated a milieu and set of institutions that Brooks benefited from, participated in, and helped foster.[103] Notably, however, the situation for Black artists and writers in Chicago changed dramatically around 1950, as the New Deal came to an end and the Cold War took off, and the very fact that the movement has only recently been taken up as such in the critical literature speaks to how many of its participants, including important touchstones for Brooks such Frank Marshall Davis and Margaret Walker, were more or less marginalized by the wider culture.[104] Significant post-Harlem Renaissance movements in Black art and writing that have received more sustained critical attention than the Chicago Renaissance, including the Umbra Collective and the Black Arts Movement, were still a few years off when Brooks's most popular poem first began to circulate.

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[103] See Schlabach, *Along the Streets of Bronzeville* (2013) and Goldsby, "The Art of Being Difficult" (2014).

If accounting precisely for the success of "We Real Cool" is a difficult endeavor, *that* it caught on is indisputable. Today, that fact is so clear as to be taken as a given. Critics and poets often introduce the poem with a brief reference to its accessibility, fame, popularity, or wide circulation.[105] Those same critics are less likely to enumerate the poem's appearances and remediations, perhaps only because the reprintings, citations, and appropriations are so numerous as to make cataloging them something of a fool's errand. Nevertheless, we may find it helpful to have a sense of just how rapid and enduring the poem's popularity has been by quickly listing a few of its most important incarnations at the outset.

Early reviews occasionally singled-out the poem, yet in 1962 when Brooks was negotiating over the contents of her *Selected Poems* (1963) with her publisher, she still had to fight for its inclusion. D. H. Melham describes how, while preparing the manuscript, Brooks balked when her editors at Harper's suggested omitting "We Real Cool" and "the ballad of the light-eyed little girl." She pushed back by "stressing that the two were technically unique" (133-34). By 1965, the poem's title was serving its first full tour of double-duty as the title of a theatrical revue performed with teenage actors in public parks in New York City. That variety show featured recitations of Brooks's poetry, including of course the poem that gave the show its name. Later that year, Dudley Randall requested permission to reprint the poem as part of Broadside Press's "Poems of Revolt" series. That single-sheet broadside came out in December 1966. Designed by Cledie Taylor, it gives the appearance white handwriting on a black background to suggest either "chalkboard [writing] or graffiti," an incisive graphic reversal that alludes to the popular 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle* (Sullivan, *On the Walls and in the Streets* 36). Subsequently, between 1968 and 1974, the poem would be reprinted in "at least sixteen anthologies" dedicated to African American writing, as part of a significant publishing trend that saw more than seventy-five anthologies featuring Black poetry appear over that span and which promulgated Brooks's piece as one of a handful of "signature poems" (Rambsy, *The Black Arts Enterprise* 75-76).[106] This initial spate of anthologization paved the way for the poem's appearance in dozens of collections of all kinds from the mid-1960s to the present day. In 1974, the poem was "was banned in a 1974 West Virginia public school dispute and in Nebraska, allegedly for the use of the word 'jazz'" which was "[e]rroneously … interpreted as a sexual reference" (Melhem 127).[107] In the context of its widespread availability and the attention generated by those bans, Helen Vendler, in her *New York Times* review of a compilation of the broadsides from Randall's press, would refer to it as "the famous 'We Real Cool'" (459).

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[104] On the end of the Illinois Writers Project in the late 1940s and the Rosenwald Fund in 1950, see Bone and Courage, 228-32.

[105] The poem's success has often been figured as a hindrance, as Harmony Holiday notes prior to her own live reading of a key Brooks title in its entirety: "I'm going to be reading an out-of-print book called *In the Mecca* by Gwendolyn Brooks… who has a lot of books. Mostly we know her actually for that poem 'We Real Cool.' I feel like everyone just pins that on her and that's it. But she published with Broadside and she had a more militant phase."

Throughout the 1980s, Brooks would often refer to the poem's popularity, and the controversies it had generated in certain states. Since then, alongside a broader increase in attention to diversity in mainstream literary collections and curricula, the poem has continued to be anthologized in print, particularly in the influential Norton anthologies, even as its brevity has made it particularly amenable to distribution online. Concurrently, the poem has been borrowed from and remediated numerous times, both by old and new platforms. It appears as the title of two different nonfiction books, including bell hooks's heavily cited *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004). It plays the central role in multiple videos, most notably a live-action dance number produced by the National Dance Institute and directed by Jacques d'Amboise in 1987; one of the Favorite Poem Project's most-viewed documentary videos, from 2014; and a captivating "paper-cut puppetry" short produced by the Poetry Foundation in 2017, which was created by Manuel Cinema (in association with Crescendo Literary) and features a script by poets Eve Ewing and Nate Marshall and music by Jamila and Ayanna Woods. In 2010, Terrance Hayes published his third poetry collection, *Lighthead*, which featured a two-part poem entitled "The Golden Shovel" that instantiated an original poetic form Hayes invented by engaging directly with "We Real Cool." Over the next few years that form would take on a life of its own, eventually serving as the backbone of its own anthology, *The Golden Shovel* (2017), and thus helping send "We Real Cool" off in new directions. We will return to Hayes and "the golden shovel" in due course, but suffice it to say that Brooks's original poem proved a catch.

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[106] Rambsy has graciously made his research into and accounting of anthologies featuring Black poetry publicly available on his website. See especially, "30 Anthologies featuring Black Poetry, 1968-1975" (11 Sept. 2011).

[107] Brooks has been clear that her intention was for "Jazz" to be a musical reference signifying a disordering of convention. As Melhem puts it, "Brooks's usage pertains to 'having fun'" (127). Regarding the sexual interpretation, Brooks remarked wryly, "I have no objection, if it helps anybody" (Guggenheim Museum Reading, 3 May 1983). "We Real Cool" was not the first of Brooks's works to be censored: In 1962, a musical rendition of "of De Witt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery" was banned by two radio stations, one in New York City and one in Los Angeles, over the word "black," which was deemed potentially offensive (Melhem 31).

Brooks's own ear for the individual catchy phrase is well documented. In particular, she was attuned to the kind of vernacular catchiness that her best-known poem seems not only to include as a part but to embody as a (very short) whole. Addison Gayle, Jr. highlights this tendency in the endearing anecdote that opens "Making Beauty from Racial Anxiety," his 1972 *New York Times* review of an early collected edition of Brooks's work. He and the poet are in a New York City taxi. She is by then, Gayle reminds us, not only a Pulitzer Prize winner but also the Poet Laureate of Illinois for life and a Distinguished Visiting Professor at City College of New York. As the cab moves “rapidly through Harlem traffic,” Gayle and Brooks “debate[] the importance of the sonnet form to black literature and life” (29). In his account, Gayle’s phrasing underscores his respect for Brooks (his elder by 15 years), particularly inasmuch as it seems to imply that he is responsible for far too much of the blabbing about poetic form when

> Suddenly the cab swerved to avoid a collision with another car, evoking a shout from the Afro-American driver: “You old squat!” Miss Brooks laughed, turned to me and noted, “Now that’s a great line, a *great* line!” (29)

The poet’s exclamation is eminently relatable. There is pleasure in saying the cabbie’s three monosyllables aloud, in imagining Brooks’s delight, and in recognizing that the poet’s ear is always open to a clip of language. The moment is also an example of a classically Kantian aesthetic encounter. Brooks’s repetition and emphasis, captured by Gayle’s italics, underscore the desire for agreement, and her gesturing of turning back toward her interlocutor embodies that demand. Perhaps it is the fleshiness of the phrase that strikes her. In repurposing a word most familiar as a verb—in reifying or incarnating “squat” into an insulting noun—the exclamation seems to mash “squash” into “kumquat.” In any case, Brooks’s instant appreciation for the phrase as a whole clearly outpaces such explanations.

More broadly, the anecdote exhibits Brooks’s fixation on what we can think of as *the small phrase*—be it “great,” colloquial, both, or otherwise. She appreciates the presence of this elemental gift in other writers, saying of Emily Dickinson, “She knew how to make a little powerhouse out of a phrase. She would string common words together and make magic. I can appreciate that" (Bezner 120). Of her own process, she remarks similarly, "I still bend intently over the little phrase" (Hull and Gallagher 92). And that phrasal fixation even worked in the opposite direction on occasion. In 1969, Brooks published *Riot*, a book that has seen a good deal of critical attention over the last two decades.[108] The third and final section of that project, "An Aspect of Love, Alive in the Ice and Fire," is a brief love poem of sorts and, at least at first glance, far less political than the rest of the book. In its first incarnation, "An Aspect of Love" opened with the line, "It is the morning of our love" (21). However, after a friend and fellow poet (Carolyn Rodgers) told Brooks of encountering that same line in a contemporaneous book by Rod McKuen, Brooks deleted it. In her autobiography she remarks, "Such a horror is every writer's nightmare. Poets, doubt any 'inevitability'" (*Report From Part One* 187).[109] The offending line is absent from all subsequent publications of the poem. The total aversion registered by Brooks, and her suggestion that it is "every writer's nightmare," is the negative of her attraction to "You old squat!" In this way of being in the world, a clip of language can be a jolt of potential or a problem to be administered. It can be something that catches the ear or an infelicity to be caught. The opening of "kitchenette building," the second poem from Brooks's first book, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), exemplifies the back-and-forth of this dynamic attentiveness to small pieces of language (20).[110]

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[108] On *Riot*, see Sullivan, "Killing John Cabot and Publishing Black" (2002); Debo, "Reflecting Violence in the Warpland" (2005); Bernes et al., "Gwendolyn Brooks's 'Riot' and the opt out" (2014); O'Rourke, "The Eros in Democracy" (2017); Fox, "The Poet and the Riot" (2015); Filreis et al., "Not Detainable" (2018).

[109] Her full explanation reads, "I had to remove the first line—'It is the morning of our love'—when Carolyn Rodgers called to tell me she had found it opening a Rod McKuen poem in *Listen to the Warm*. Even though I wrote mine first!—as can be seen in the hard-cover edition of *Riot*, which includes a dated script-version of the poem. Such a horror is every writer's nightmare. Poets, doubt any 'inevitability'" (*Report* 187). The line in fact appears not in *Listen to the Warm* but in McKuen's subsequent collection, *Lonesome Cities* (1968). The opening entry in that book's "San Francisco" section, a poem entitled "Morning, One," begins, "It is the morning of our love / our sighs are all snow-silver white / and clean as breakfast napkins" (15). A similar phrase appears in a much earlier book of verse, *Divine Adventures* (1907) by John Niendorff, which opens, "For in the morning of our love, there came / The spirit sings such entrancing notes, / As sweeps the whole empyrian with a flame, / Wherein, a dream, pure lofty pleasure floats" (7). The only other example contemporaneous with *Riot* that I have been able locate is a song, "The Morning of Our Love," which appears to be under a copyright dated August 6, 1969 to Marcia DeFren and Gloria Nissenson (Library of Congress, *Catalog of Copyright Entries: Third Series*).

> We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
> Grayed in, and gray. “Dream” makes a giddy sound, not strong
> Like “rent,” “feeding a wife,” “satisfying a man.”
>
> But could a dream send up through onion fumes…

The “gray” emerging involuntary from “Grayed” conveys, in coming to close on the heels of the latter, the tight spaces of the kitchenette apartment, but that uncomfortable repetition also seems to generate the word-level self-consciousness expressed by the quotation marks, which themselves begin crowding the lines. The poem contrasts the possibility of something roomier—a “‘Dream’” that slipping “up” through the “onion fumes” of the marks that encase it becomes a momentarily unmarked “dream”—with the practicalities immediately at hand. These repetitions of words and graphemes, as well as the repetitive clipping the punctuation enacts, are balanced by a series of insistently literary references: to Langston Hughes (“What happens to a dream deferred?”), T. S. Eliot (“Here I am, an old man in a dry month,” “Tenants of the house / Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season”), and W. H. Auden (“Noons of dryness find you fed / By the involuntary powers”).[111] The sense of simultaneity created by different, overlapping levels of crowding is driven by the poem’s word- and phrase-level focus. The dense verbal atmosphere of “kitchenette apartment” is made up of allusions to a range of very different makers of modernism crammed in alongside colloquial clips. That thickness conveys both a modernist’s commitment to verbal condensation and a populist’s concern with overcrowding; they express each other.

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[110] Unless otherwise noted, all pages numbers for Brooks’s poems refer to *Blacks* (1987).

[111] Bone and Courage note the allusion to Auden’s “Lullaby” in their reading of this poem (220).

As a result of her abiding interest in the phrase, Brooks may well have known that her act of deletion from *Riot* could never achieve perfect success. The first edition of the book has been digitized and made readily available online by Eclipse, "a free on-line archive focusing on digital facsimiles of the most radical small-press writing from the last quarter century" edited by Craig Dworkin and Danny Snelson. The poet Lillian-Yvonne Bertram recently used that facsimile as the source for a digital poetry project, *Gwen Brooks Forever*.[112] In a manner resembling Brooks's seizing on the cab driver's exclamation, Bertram's title borrows from the contemporary online discourse of hype. The project itself uses code to generate new poems by treating "An Aspect of Love" as a syntactic scaffold and the entirety of *Riot* as a lexical database. Put simply, the grammar remains the same even as the key words change, in a manner resembling Mad Libs. For example, in place of Brooks's original lines, "Merry foreigners in our morning, / we laugh, we touch each other, / are responsible props and posts," Bertram's code gives us, "Sweaty street in our chatter, / any dying, we crunching each other, / are driving wire and guns." The shortest, most interpersonal, most "lyric" section of *Riot* is thus filled with the words from the entire text, much of which focuses on the "race riots" that took place after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Although the changes are dramatic, the similarities of the grammatical texture are subtly eerie.

Because the code treats the Eclipse facsimile as its source text, the generated poems all begin with a version of the horrible "inevitability" that Brooks attempted to delete. If we collate the examples of that line referenced in Bertram's discussion of her project, in the order referenced, we can generate our own hypnotic five-line poem:

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[112] Bertram hosts the project at www.forevergwenbrooks.com/about.html.

It is the morning of our love.
It is the noun of our noun.
It is the chains of our seas.
It is the black of our hell.
It is the black of our blackness.

It is difficult to imagine a line less McKuen-esque, a line more distinct from McKuen's "It is the morning of our love / our sighs are all snow-silver white," than "It is the black of our blackness"—unless, of course, we read it as a purely existential meditation (*Lonesome Cities* 15). We might compare the computer-generated cry to popular excerpts from the "Poet of the lonely," such as "to lie down in the darkness / and listen to the warm" (D. McGrath n.p.; *Listen to the Warm* 56). But the context provided in and around Betrams's project largely invalidates such comparisons. Her own framing discussion, *Riot* itself, and Brooks's work as a whole ask us to read "black" and "blackness" as racial signifiers and thus to hear the hellish historical violence embedded in "chains" and "seas" in the five lines above. The apparent openness of "It is the black of our blackness" is, then, a more freighted example of the familiar circulatory problem raised by Rodgers's re-recognition of "It is the morning of our love." When a phrase floats too far from its various contexts or circulates so widely as to be evacuated of substance, it can be misread or repurposed. One of Brooks's many interviewers over the years, working up toward asking the poet to read her most famous poem aloud, expresses these basic concerns as a pair of rhetorical questions: "That's the problem with a poem isn't it? Once you let go of it, you have no control on how people interpret it?" (Presson 133). This fundamental difficulty of signification frequently finds itself exacerbated by brevity, which is itself a quality central to many conceptions of what constitutes "a poem." The issue of circulation beyond "control" is one of the major indices or problems of shortness, and it is the one Brooks's writing, in its commitment to the catchy phrase, is most attuned to address. In what follows, I examine a some of the circuits traced by "We Real Cool," Brooks's more general investment in shortness as a potential "solution" to the difficulty of reconciling populism and modernism, and finally the way that solution reconstitutes the problem of over-circulation in a manner that Brooks's literary inheritors themselves attempt to address.[113]

2. Transparent Cool

Generally speaking, the relationship between "We Real Cool" and its widespread circulation has been understood in two ways. Critics have tended to focus on either the poem's direct, nearly transparent relation to a specifically Black social reality *or* on its technical virtuosity. This section will focus on the former, looking at treatments that position the poem as "too Social" (*Report From Part One* 78). In such moments, a partial short-circuiting of the interpretive process often occurs, as if the reader or user feels certain the poem is able to speak for itself.

In an early review of Brooks's *Selected Poems* (1963) for *Poetry*, Bruce Cutler introduces the first four lines of "We Real Cool" by remarking on the poet's "ability to take a really spoken language and make it work for her" (24). He continues, with a repetition of the word "work" that itself carries the point: "[I]n her work, there are all the familiar cadences and sounds of speech, right down to the bonehard rhetoric of the 1960s." Registering qualities of immediacy ("bonehard") and commonness ("familiar"), the reviewer finds phrasing "take[n]" from a particular historical moment and made to do work on the page. The poem's production of this taken-from-life quality made it a prime candidate for editors of anthologies of poetry for children. Reviewing a roundup of such anthologies in 1968, Muriel Rukeyser singles out "We Real Cool" by quoting it in full and giving it nearly the final word. Echoing Cutler, particularly in her use of Anglo-Saxon diction, Rukeyser calls it "one hammerblow of a last poem" and "this smiter," before closing by contextualizing it with an odd final sentence of her own. "Fantasias, waking, the daily life of the child," she writes (BR40). The brief, focused hardness of Brooks's couplets, for Rukeyser, returns us to the reality of "daily life" after the "bubbles," the riddles, and the "light and funny" rhymes found elsewhere in the collections (BR38).

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[113] On these competing aspects of Brooks's work and career, the opening pages of Mootry, "'Down the Whirlwind of Good Rage': An Introduction to Gwendolyn Brooks": "In short, at the nexus of Brooks's art lies a fundamental commitment to both the modernist aesthetics of art and the common ideal of social justice" (1). "On one level," Mootry continues, "Brooks is a word wizard, a poet's poet. On another level, she belongs to the 'populist' tradition of her midwestern predecessors, Langston Hughes, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, and Vachel Lindsay. Leaving aside the question of aesthetics, the sociohistorical fulcrum of Brooks's art seems to be a tripartite base of regionalism, race, and gender. In terms of literature, Brooks's regionality has bifurcated roots: the populism of Sandburg, Lindsay, and Masters and the elitist 'art for art's sake' tradition of Eliot, Pound, and Stevens" (4). Mootry describes Brooks as balancing the Midwest as "the locus of the spirit of economic and social revolt" with *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (6) and as balancing the requirements of "craft" and technique against her "minority status" as a black writer in mid-century America and her poems' "racial themes" (9).

Later critics locate a similarly direct connection between "We Real Cool" and lived experience. Kathryn Lindberg assumes that the "title and refrain" were "borrowed from black [American] English street argot" before the poem eventually "became something of an anthem" (52). *The Bean Eaters* as a whole was sometimes criticized for borrowing or copying too much from life and thus demonstrating insufficient artistry. Richard Flynn refers offhandedly to "the negative criticism Brooks would receive for being too political" in the book, and Brooks herself attributes the book's relative lack of immediate attention, which she dubs "dead silence," to the sense that it was "too Social" (68; *Report From Part One* 78). Mary Mootry places that tag in contrast to "folksy" (for Brooks's first volume, *A Street in Bronzeville*) and "mandarin" (her second, *Annie Allen*). For Mootry, the difference of this "too political" and "too Social" third book "presented a problem of interpretation for its critics" (178). Brooks would reiterate these concerns in interviews from the 1970s and 1980s, noting that Frederick Bock, a reviewer for

Poetry, found the book “bitter” and that it “has been called a political work” as both a form of praise and as a dismissal (Tate 106-7; Hull and Gallagher 96).

The purported simplicity of the relation between *The Bean Eater*’s most prominent piece, “We Real Cool,” and the world has been linked, both explicitly and implicitly, to the poem’s suitability for a variety of readers, venues, and circumstances. The poem certainly seems to activate, in certain readers, an experience of “recognition,” in the sense theorized by Rita Felski in *The Uses of Literature* (2008). In her “un-manifesto,” Felski describes four everyday “modes of reading” (20). She sketches “positive aesthetics” grounded not in negative affects or suspicion but in the “emphatic experience(s)” of encountering particular cultural artifacts (22). Introducing “recognition” as the first of four such modes, Felski writes, “While turning a page I am arrested by a compelling description, a constellation of events, a conversation between characters, an interior monologue” (23). Discrete “compelling” moments in the text generate a distinct, if perhaps replicable, experience in the reader: “Suddenly and without warning, a flash of connection leaps across the gap between text and reader; an affinity or an attunement is brought to light.” Throughout the chapter, Felski focuses on textual components associated with narrative. She examines description, conversation, and character, and then later turns to perspective and “representation” (or “acknowledgment”). Reflecting this, the excerpts she uses to demonstrate the experience of readerly “recognition” come from novels, tragedies, comics, and nonfiction prose. Yet Felski’s language of instantaneity—“arrested,” “suddenly” (twice), “without warning,” “a flash,” “leaps”—is well-suited to the features of shorter modes such as “flash” fiction and poetry. In fact, the mixture of “self-fashioning” and “improvisational subjectivity” Felski discovers in a range of textual narratives is arguably the central concern of “We Real Cool,” not to mention of “cool” as a cultural aesthetic more broadly. A number of critics have noted as much, and Brooks herself says, “The boys have no accented sense of themselves, yet they are aware of a semi-defined personal importance,” suggesting that the form of her poem, its sharp breaks and neat rhymes, express an adolescent, improvised, and partial portion of the process of group-formation (*Report From Part One* 185). “Say the ‘We’ softly,” she instructs.

The existing reader’s reports—that is, the documented accounts of non-expert reactions to the poem—certainly suggest that “We Real Cool” functions as a strong site of identification or “recognition” for many readers, oftentimes as groups. Studies of the use of poetry in classrooms and of “social pedagogy” catalog numerous student responses that describe “We Real Cool” as relatable, as an accurate reflection of the lives of certain peers, or as a point of self-identification. In study from 1972, one sixth-grade girl states, “I like it because it describes how some kids act,” while in a dissertation from 2005 a college student writes, “Yes, I can relate to this poem. I felt…” (Terry 97; Kerr-Ging 80-81). These two reactions are combined in the Favorite Poem Project’s short on “We Real Cool,” which follows John Ulrich, a white college student in his twenties from South Boston who has lost friends to drug addiction. Regarding his selection of Brooks’s poem as his personal “favorite,” Ulrich explains, “It was like telling my story … how quick it just snatched them up … It just made sense to me … How things started out so innocent and got so drastic so quick … A lot of kids I went to high school with aren’t alive anymore.”

Reactions of a somewhat wide range are chronicled in Brooks’s published recollections and interviews and in excerpts from her archives quoted by critics:

> February 11, 1965. From sixteen year old Placido Tugo of Chicago’s Manley Upper Grade Center School on West Polk Street, in reference to my reading of “We Real Cool”:

> "Mrs. Gwendolyn Brooks gave me a good lesson that I hope that I will never forget because i was planning to quit school. But now I know that there is no place like school. I would want to tell her how I feel in side of my heart. (*Report From Part One* 12)

> Children like it, young people like it, because it has a kind of insouciance and a staccato effect that they enjoy. And I was really gratified when I read it and talked about poetry at the Howard Woodson High School in Washington here [in 1986]. Young people, boys at that time, because I've gone back and they've done it again with girls in the mixture, jumped up from all over the large room, the library chanting that poem, snapping their fingers rhythmically. I love that. (Jabbour and Miller 130)

> One listener wrote to Brooks in a letter: "Upon hearing WE REAL COOL for the third time it was a revelation, the way you recited it. The insight I arrived at was that this other poem was about me. I don't mean the possessive 'me,' myself, and I. But, the collective 'me' in the experience of many brother [*sic*] and sisters who read the light between your lines" (Queen). The shifter 'we' hit this listener hard: he felt implicated by its collective address and heard the collective echo within him, the 'collective 'me,'' as he calls it." (Allison 106, 229)

On the one hand, these three accounts embody the kind of recognition Felski describes. On the other hand, they undermine any cursory attempt at categorization. Reading through them and then returning to *The Uses of Literature*, I am struck by how many of Felski's descriptions of her own reading experiences, while believable and theoretically convincing, are devoid of specific referents. Moreover, her examples from other texts are almost exclusively "vignettes of recognition" taken from fictional narratives or from other critical generalizations about readers' responses. It is tempting to suggest, rather simply, that a very brief and deceptively tricky text (such as "We Real Cool") is one ideally suited to generating a wide array of responses.[114] In this line of thinking, the flashes of recognition sparked by a short poem, however varied, are tied up with its suitability for wide circulation and remediation. In part, that suitability derives from the poem's salience to particular lives and situations, which has led it to be put to a variety of "uses."

For the critics, this is generally a point of entry or of dissatisfaction. Gary Smith opens a piece on the poem by writing, "Perhaps no other poem by Gwendolyn Brooks has been as widely anthologized and generated as much critical debate as 'We Real Cool'" (49). David Baker includes "We Real Cool" on a short list of "those anthologizable, more easily teachable poems," and more recently the host of the podcast *Poetry Off the Shelf* asserts of it, "That poem was made to be on the subway" (Baker 88; Fox n.p.). The qualities that seem to explain the poem's frequent appearance in anthologies, textbooks, and teaching exercises, as well as on actual subways and buses, allow it to be deployed in various contexts and for both its connection to a "really spoken language" and really lived experiences *and* the status of "really" in those phrases to be taken somewhat for granted (Cutler 24).

The incarnation of "We Real Cool" that most strenuously tests any distinction between recognition and instrumentality occurred in 1965. That summer, the New York Shakespeare Festival Mobile Theater presented "'WE REAL COOL,' a live teenage show, on the second afternoon of each neighborhood visiting in the five boroughs" ("We Real Cool Is Live Teenage Show" 46). Repeated advertisements for, reviews of, and references to this production constitute many of the phrase's and poem's earliest appearances in the printed public sphere. Less well-documented is the tactical manner in which this transparent version of the phrase was deployed. During the previous year, in the summer of 1964, "Some audiences [for the Mobile Theater summer shows] finding the concept of theater decorum as alien as it was in Elizabethan times, created a substantial din; four performances were canceled because of rock-throwing" (Barthel 3). The *New York Times* coverage continues:

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[114] One of the most revealing accounts an audience's response to a live reading by Brooks, though it lacks any mention of "We Real Cool" in particular, is the one offered by Kenneth Rexroth in an article for *The Nation* concerning a 1964 conference on "the Negro Writer in the United States." Rexroth is struck by the "genuine literary response" of the audience to readings by *both* Brooks and Amiri Baraka; by the requests from the audience for Brooks to read "one favorite poem after another"; and by the ways in which all attempts to position the two poets as at aesthetic or political loggerheads were "fiercely resisted by ordinary people in the audience" (98).

> [A] 73-page report, "Shakespeare in the Neighborhood," published by the Twentieth Century Fund… ascribed the rock-throwing to teen-age gangs resentful of the take-over of their territory, the playground. … Hopes for better luck this year are invested chiefly in two earnest young men … doing a public relations job … For bait, they are using a special performance, at 6 P.M. on the second day of each stand, of a one-hour affair called "We Real Cool," with teen-agers from Chelsea who have been organized by an actor, Robert Hooks, into a workshop group presenting serious and comic improvisational pieces. "Where there are gangs, whether bopping or friendly, we're trying to reach them," says Bernard Gersten associate producer of the festival. "We're not trying to tame the wilder elements in one hour, but we're hoping for temporary neutralization." (Barthel 3)

The public relations work included orchestrating meetings between members of the troupe, locals, police officers, and in some cases "gang members." Supplementing these meetings was what the *Times* reporter describes as the "bait" of *We Real Cool*, which included readings of Brooks poems, a monologue from Martin B. Duberman's *In White America: A Documentary Play* (1964), and "serious and comic improvisational pieces." If Gersten's language of "neutralization" is more than a tad hawkish, reviews of the performances suggest that the détente was effective, the "bait" was well-received, and the tour as a whole saw far fewer disruptions than it had in the summer of 1964. That Brooks's poem and the "affair" to which it gave its name were responsible for this change, from one hot New York City summer to the next, seems dubious, but the producers' intentions were clear. They perceived "We Real Cool" as directly relevant to the lives of some of their audience members, and therefore as a straightforward means of both entertainment and appeasement.

At almost the exact same moment as it was being used to induce palliative identification, "We Real Cool" was reimagined as one in a series of "Poems of Revolt" broadsides published by Dudley Randall's small Broadside Press in Detroit. Randall was explicitly interested in linking Black aesthetics to radical Black politics, and James Sullivan provides a convincing textual studies argument that the design and layout by Cledie Taylor achieves just that goal. His case relies on contrasting the visually punchy broadside with its specifically "white setting" by Harper's, Brooks's mainstream publisher until 1967, the year she began publishing exclusively with Black-owned presses (33-38).[115] Sullivan's assertion about the importance of Brooks's institutional decision is not to be taken lightly, and that decision has in fact been described as a model of commitment by both Black and white authors, in both the 1960s and the present. Yet contrast between the material texts published by Broadside and Harper's allows Sullivan to ignore the possibility of reading "We Real Cool" *as* its collection of instantiations. Focusing on two diametrically opposed instances, Sullivan necessarily overstates the difference between the later Broadside version and “We Real Cool” “itself,” as that fuller collection: “As graffiti, the poem is an anonymous, unregulated, transgressive utterance, not the work of that contained, knowable, critically manageable construction, the imagination of the poet. It is a rebellious sort of folk culture” (36). This poster-like printing and Sullivan’s description of it, including his terms “graffiti” and “folk culture,” will eventually help us read “We Real Cool” more broadly.

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[115] Sullivan reproduces the broadside on page 37 of *On the Walls and in the Streets*.

My last pair of examples—the young Shakespeareans protected by “We Real Cool”’s power as a site of identification, the pool players reimagined as budding Black Nationalists—are limit cases, to be sure. But the contrast between them and the text’s ready adaptability to different uses evidence how “We Real Cool” puts pressure on its own relation to the “real” in a manner that leads to strong effects of all kinds. Even those critics or “users” most apt to emphasize verbal nuance have a tendency to reveal their own sense of the poem’s transparency. Scholar and activist bell hooks borrowed from the poem to title a collection of her later essays. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2003) includes a single reference to Brooks, in its final section on “the coolness of being real”:

> Much hip-hop culture is mainstream because it is just a black minstrel show—an imitation of dominator desire, not a rearticulation, not a radical alternative. No wonder, then, that patriarchal hip-hop culture has done little to save the lives of black males and done more to teach them, as Gwendolyn Brooks’s prophetic poem which used the popular vernacular phrase “we real cool” as its title, states, to embrace a vision of “we real cool” that includes the assumption that “we die soon.” (142-43)

To buttress her claim about hip-hop culture, hooks takes the title and first sentence of Brooks's poem at something close to face value. She describes it as a pre-existing "popular vernacular phrase" that itself reflects a coherent, if for hooks highly problematic, perspective maintained by a subset of Black men in the twenty-first century. Yet if anything, hooks's own book—a hugely influential reference point for researchers studying Black masculinity—has served as an important node in a network of circulations and re-circulations of a phrase that seems to have originated not as "popular vernacular" as such but with Brooks's poem in or around 1959.

Yet hooks is far from alone in recognizing the power (as evidence or otherwise) of the poem's apparently direct correspondence to lived reality, and we would be mistaken to simply dismiss this widely shared sense of such correspondence. Terrance Hayes explores in more detail the parallels between the textual "Jazz" of Brooks's poem and contemporary hip-hop:

> Picture seven men so young the slightly older men still call them boys reciting Brooks's poem to each other at the Golden Shovel. Surely it could happen. If you can imagine young black men reciting Common or Kanye or Chief Keef, you can imagine them in a late 1950s South Side Chicago universe reciting Brooks. (Kahn xxix)

The poem here is in the culture to be circulated via recitation. Even as Hayes's imperative grammar ("Picture," "If you can imagine," "you can imagine") frames his thought and acknowledges, implicitly, a level of distance between "We Real Cool" and an actually existing world, it relies on a sense of the poem's quasi-transparent relation to that reality: "Surely it could happen." This suggestion—surely it *could* be real—disarms any easy critique we might make of such assumptions of immediacy by insisting that whether it was or is real is beside the point.

This complex quality is strong enough in "We Real Cool" that even critics focused on Brooks's deep engagement with modernist predecessors and verbal craft describe the poem as transparent. Noting that the poem "can be added to the list of *realistic poetry*," Houston A. Baker, Jr. places it among those "passages" that "reinforce the designation of Miss Brooks as a realist" and judges that "If Miss Brooks had insisted on a strict realism and nothing more, she could perhaps be written off as a limited poet" ("The Achievement" 25, emphasis added). For Baker, who elsewhere underscores the poem's power, the designation of "We Real Cool," a poem about being or trying to be "real," is clearly and distinctly an example of a kind of realism. For Helen Vendler, the tone and thus the meaning of the poem are nearly immediate. Discussing a Rita Dove poem that "may owe something to Gwendolyn Brooks's 'We Real Cool,'" Vendler asserts that "it avoids the prudishness of Brooks's judgmental monologue, which though it is ostensibly spoken by adolescents, barely conceals its adult reproach of their behavior" ("Rita Dove" 384). A central question the poem presents is thus easily resolved by critical fiat.

In an extended, sympathetic engagement with Brooks's poetry, Allison Cummings revisits the author's reception history and deconstructs the tendency to take Brooks's word regarding the hard split in her career between her early work (1945-1967) and her late work (1967-2003). Cummings convincingly demonstrates the similarities in lineation and diction in work from both periods (or "periods"), and in making her case she zeroes in on "We Real Cool" (1959) and "The Blackstone Rangers (1968). Acknowledging that despite the stylistic similarities between these poems there remains plenty of space open for difference between them, Cummings writes, "Where the rebellion of the pool players was self-destructive and *regarded* with pity and sadness *by* the speaker…" (11, emphasis added). This is a powerfully perceptive slip. The "speaker," in Cummings's formulation, regards the pool players' actions with "pity and sadness," even though those players *are*, grammatically and representationally, the speaker. The slippage is less a mistake that misses something about the poem than it is a productive insight. Cummings, in trying but failing to disarticulate the speaker from the pool players, gets at the complexity of the poem's "voice" as well as the special complexity of group subject-formation and first-person plural enunciation. When Sullivan describes the broadside version of "We Real Cool" as a "quotation" of the pool players, his description seems at once exactly right and a too-quick conflation of poem to the "discourse" of the players; likewise, when Cummings attempts to place a wedge between players and speaker, her perception seems at once experientially accurate and formally or grammatically off.

The temptation to view the speaker viewing the pool players, with a kind of false transparency at both levels of view, is difficult to resist. This hole in the poem is most seductive in its final lines. The poem moves, syntactically, from a completed past ("We / Left school") to continuing past ("We / Lurk late. We / strike straight…") to a grammatical anomaly ("We / Die soon") in which the present expression of a future tense ("We will die soon") is abbreviated to create tension between the present tense of "Die" and the near-futurity or implied inevitability of "soon." In that gap, readers like Cummings and Vendler hear a "speaker," "Brooks's judgmental monologue," or the poem's "adult reproach." Lindberg calls attention to this same gap when she distinguishes her reading from an earlier discussion of the poem by Hortense Spillers, noting how "that shifty pronoun [We] works a critique on audience overidentification and poet's supposed representativeness" (55). Part of the poem's charm, then, seems to be this trap. Because of its brevity, it proves wily enough to both evoke and evade attempts to read it as a direct transcription of the real, copied from life, as well as interpretations that would find in it transparent affects ("pity and sadness," "overidentification") or transparent moralizing ("judgmental … reproach"). Stepping back and surveying the wide range of reactions to and readings of "We Real Cool," we may sense that "recognition" is still the most frequently salient "mode of engagement," at least of the four presented in Felski's "folk reading" schema. But as Felski acknowledges the "overlaps" between it and her fourth and final category, "shock"—overlaps captured by "the everyday phrase 'the shock of recognition'"—perhaps we can do a bit better (22, 133). Building off her terminology, what "We Real Cool" seems to most often elicit is "the trick" or "the catch" of recognition.

3. Technical Cool

If "We Real Cool" has often been perceived as a direct expression of life on Chicago's South Side in the late 1950s, or of lives less bounded by geographic and historical particulars, it has simultaneously registered with many critics as Brooks's most distinctively "technical" work. Manipulable enough to be instrumentalized as both cathartic tranquilizer and political incitement, "We Real Cool" was simultaneously being both praised and dismissed for its linguistic dexterity. These latter, formalist claims are often grounded in the text's overt display of poetic devices—including enjambment, internal rhyme, and a unique metrical pattern of two strong beats and one weak beat per line—and its conformation to strict linguistic limits. Its language is uniformly monosyllabic; articles and prepositions are absent; and, with the notable exception of "We," no word is repeated in the body of the text. The poem abides no syntactical caulk, no filler.

Discussions of "We Real Cool" that emphasize the poem's virtuosity and density of technical effects are myriad. Lindberg, for instance, describes it as encompassing "a full range of traditional poetic techniques" (53). Such considerations frequently coincide with claims about Brooks's entire body of work; they seek to highlight the poem's distinctiveness, as if its sheer technicity made it a kind of limit case example of her style or tendencies. Early in her career, in 1950, Brooks herself wrote, "The Negro poet's most urgent duty, at present, is to polish his technique, his way of presenting his truths and his beauties" (Stavros 38). She would later receive significant pushback for this line of thinking, yet she consistently replied to such challenges with nuance, rather than simple reassertion or appeasement. She also repeatedly expressed appreciation for letters from James Weldon Johnson and an early workshop she attended in at the South Side Community Art Center, which introduced her to "the moderns" at a time when she "didn't know anything about technique" (Angle 19; Newquist 30; Lewis 59). Reviewers of course call attention to particular devices that appear in specific poems, and her entire oeuvre is sometimes framed in related terms: "[Brooks] located her rhetoric of social critique, her poetic discourse, in a range of studied poetic techniques, a *slanted* intentionality" (Mootry 178). Even amid this focus on form, "We Real Cool" manages to stand out. D. H. Melhem, who proffers one of the few extended readings of the poem, places it among "the most interesting pieces technically" in Brooks's body of work and reminds us that Brooks saw the piece as "technically unique" (127, 133-34).

Often this aspect of the work is presented in a positive light. Baker notes that Brooks is "a master of technique" and, in a discussion focusing on "We Real Cool," that "her technique is superb" (28, 31). Reiterating similar terms a number of times, as if to fuse his observations with his evaluations by way of incantation, Baker notes that "in this technical realm"—of "fine skill" and "skilled craftsmanship"—Brooks is "superb" (28). Repeatedly, her technique is described as a kind of "word magic," and the language of Baker's own assessment carries over into reviews that mention his work on Brooks: “in Gwendolyn Brooks one finds the technical perfection of word magic” (Baker 23, 28; Perkins 91).

This emphasis on the made-ness of the poem, on how it represents technical skill elevated to the level of magic, continues into more prosaic and prosodic discussions. Smith notes how the author’s highly distinctive way of performing the poem suggests useful prosodic and generic interpretations. In all the major extant recordings, Brooks treats the piece not with casual immediacy or as simply a snippet of the everyday “real language” of young Black men in Chicago circa 1959. Instead, she performs the poem with a distinctive, breathy quietness of the “We” that comes at the end of the first seven lines. As mentioned previously, she has described this practice as signaling her intention for readers to “Say the ‘We’ softly.” Smith, attuned to this performance, describes the metrical result: “[Brooks] also stresses their existential freedom in the poem’s *antibacchius* meter” (49). He explains that the Greek Bacchius meter was associated with drinking songs, and suggests that Brooks’s reversal can be understood to generate a mournful or tragic drinking revelry, so we go from the genres of drinking song and the carpe diem poem, from the Greeks and the cavalier tradition, to a kind of hip transposition of same (“thin ye gin while ye may”). In providing this generic context, Smith balances the poem’s technical features (especially its possible punning on the word “Jazz” and its unusual and awfully unfree meter) against its meanings, without reducing one to the other.

Expanding the discursive field even further, we might see the density of verbal effects in Brooks’s poem as highlighting a certain aspects of the aesthetic of “cool.” In his *The Laws of Cool* (2004), Alan Liu describes “the cool” as an affect of reserve that embodies the “ethos of the unknown” (9). In his account, the “viral aesthetics” of cool carries a reserve of that “‘destructively creative’ counter-ethos,” which rhymes well with the pool players’ defiant or nonchalant attitude toward institutionalized knowledge-work (“We / Left school”) (374). If, as Liu argues, “Cool is feeling that is muted by the technical. It is a technical feeling or feeling for the technical,” then the ostensible subject matter of the poem—its plural speaking persona, its social situation—is both reinforced by and deepened by its linguistic features (236). Elaborating on this connection in a too-brief discussion of the relationship between music and cool—a term that a number of cultural histories trace back to saxophonist Coleman Hawkins and one that was popularized by Miles Davis’s *The Birth of the Cool* (recorded 1949, released 1956)—Liu writes,

> the very notion of “improvisation” as we now understand it means free play based antithetically on underlying technical rigor, like a jazz riff played on a demanding instrument. Cool, in other words, has something deeply to do with “technique,” whose efficient alignment with technology has been the premise of both industrialism and post-industrialism, but whose exact nature we must now probe more deeply. Above all, cool shows that there is no such thing as the “exact” slaving of technique to technology. Rather, technique is always also a way to express the archaic interval, lag, play, or “slack” between a people and their society. Such slack, we may say, is the fundamental gesture within all cool gestures. (294)

This echoes Smith’s unpacking of Brooks’s surprisingly whispered “We”’s in her live readings. Both the players’ calm skill or *techne* at the pool table (“We / Strike straight”) and Brooks’s tight work of art—with its small moments of play, lag, and slack—rely on a combination of technical proficiency and improvisational ability (“We / Jazz June”). Improvising on or off established norms here means playing just before or just after the beat, leaving school just a bit early (summer break is almost there), tweaking genres (cavalier poetry), and craftily reworking forms (the couplet, the internal rhyme). In all cases, the misalignment—the slack—is itself small.

Yet not all commenters have seen the poem's dense network of technical effects—its constructedness, its lack of transparency—in a wholly positive light. James Allen Hall remarks, "And though it is a masterful poem, 'We Real Cool' would not be the representative I'd pick of her poems" (28). More recently Danielle Chapman, discussing Brooks in the context of the 100th anniversary of the poet's birth, remarks, "It's definitely an example of Brooks's virtues as a craftswoman, yet I think (as she did) that the poem is way overrated. She was far too ambitious a poet to allow her reputation to rest on well-executed gimmicks" ("Gwendolyn Brooks 101"). We will observe what Brooks herself (seems to have) thought of the poem in a moment, but first I want to pause to consider Chapman's evaluation of it as "way overrated" and a "well-executed gimmick[]." In a kind of argumentative legerdemain, her claim functions as the other side of the coin of Baker's discussion of Brooks's "word magic." The etymology of gimmick is uncertain, but as Sianne Ngai notes, with reference to Fredric Jameson, most dictionary definitions of the term refer to the "small device" used by a magician to accomplish a trick; moreover, in a kind of "trick-based etymology" the term "gimmick" itself "might be an anagram of magic" (Jameson 113; Ngai "Theory" 495n60, 468n7). In any case, the proximity of the device and the corresponding aesthetic judgment to the realms of "magic," suggests that Chapman's extension of the critics who find the poem highly or merely technical is not so wide off the mark as to be idiosyncratic. For instance, in an extended discussion of "the free-verse line" that opens with "We Real Cool" as its primary exemplar of successful "free" verse, Shana McCollum claims, "Rhetorical and visual imperatives for the line-break have some appeal; but, in excess—or relied upon as the guiding principle—they feel gimmicky, distracting from, and often overpowering, other aspects of the poem" (162). For McCallum, "We Real Cool" itself is a success, but her use of it in this context suggests its proximity to the judgmental epithet, "gimmicky," that Chapman finds fitting.

In her explicit theorization of "gimmicky" as an aesthetic judgment, Ngai describes that judgment as simultaneously negative and complex. In this account, the gimmick is a "compromised aesthetic form"; it is "fundamentally an aesthetic failure" in which, reversing the temporal trajectory of experience of the sublime, "our negative response" follows and ultimately "overrides" an initial more "positive" response (481). Part of our concern when we describe a cultural artifact as a gimmick "has something to do with the gimmick's special relation to time (its saving), to labor (its reduction), and to value (its cheapening)" (470). As an "operational aesthetic," it is a judgment that dismisses its object on the grounds that it is too machinic: its moving parts are too visible and seem to be working "too hard" (as in a cheap gadget or a text laden with literary devices) and that its final effect is cheap—too easily achieved by an object working "too little" (476, 472).

The sense of being ripped off is then a kind of problematic smallness, shortness, or littleness. And that sense is explored at multiple levels by "We Real Cool," which (like many of Ngai's examples) both depicts and functions as a gimmick. The pool players, young enough that they still can have "Left school," speak or sing of their own lives with a kind of wicked foreshortening. The poem opens with an obscured present tense ("We real cool"), moves briefly in the completed past ("Left school"), and then lives mostly in an ongoing present tense that moves from games ("Strike straight") we might associate with any age to progressively more mature experiences ("Lurk late," "Sing sin," "Thin gin"). The slight off-ness of time here—of leaving and lurking, of jazzing lines so they end abruptly, of improvisatory lags away from the beat—is condensed and amplified in the final, polysemous moment: “We / Die soon.” In that last line and a half, the missing helping verb—the future tense “will”—signifies something of what is missing—an adequate or just level of control over the situation—as well as the temporal whirlpool of a predicted, assumed, or inevitable near-future (“soon”) spoken in the present tense. That simultaneity emphasizes how “We Real Cool” functions as a too-catchy gimmick at multiple levels. To unpack this more fully, it will be helpful to see how Brooks uses “shortness” to convey specific themes across her body of work, and to examine that work’s relationship to the sociological literature of and about its time.

4. The Thematics of Constraint

The reactions to “We Real Cool,” though dichotomized, do not take part in a neat dialectical trajectory. The record might have presented us with a straightforward set of “social” readings—emphasizing, for instance, Brooks’s race and her presumed obligations as a Black poet writing in mid-century America—followed, historically, by a set of “formal” readings emphasizing Brooks’s distinctiveness as a wordsmith and her reworkings of modernist techniques deployed by authors who emerged earlier in the century. Or it might have presented the reverse. But we find neither of these conceivable trajectories, nor does the critical record conclude with a convenient third interpretive movement in which Brooks’s most famous poem is understood to demand, or help manufacture, a reconciliation of those two interpretive poles.

Instead, what we encounter is a messy set of polarized readings taking place roughly alongside one another (temporally) and a scattering of thoughtful attempts to address simultaneously the formal and sociopolitical aspects of the poem. I am interested in these readings as a corpus, in part, because they buttress and give texture to the claim that her poem has a legitimate case for the dubious honor of being "the most often quoted, even the most widely known, short poem" by a postwar American author. We will return later to the poem's wide circulation, and at some length to its own thinking about circulation. For the moment, however, I wish to call attention to the tendency of these readings to position "We Real Cool" as an outlier within Brooks's larger body of work. For such critics, Brooks's poem is neither as good nor as properly representative as its success might suggest. James Allen Hall's suggestion that it would not be his "pick," which I quoted briefly earlier, is from a passage in his essay, "The Politics of Neglect," which wraps up and summarizes his argument about racial segregation within the literary field:

> I have endeavored to outline the ways in which neglect happens—in classrooms, in essays on our art, in anthologies, at conferences. All of this forms and informs the force of the educational canon that has relegated Ms. Brooks to one relatively early poem. And though it is a masterful poem, "We Real Cool" would not be the representative I'd pick of her poems. (28)

The crisp logic behind Hall's choice might be construed as a maxim: If the wide success of a single poem obliges it into the position of representing the poet (in syllabi, anthologies, literary histories, and so on), that poem cannot be an accurate "representative." In the case of "We Real Cool," the circulatory success of this single, short poem necessarily makes it an outlier with respect to Brooks's style or concerns more generally. Its very success makes it unrepresentative. Or rather, more accurately, its representativeness in practice makes it unrepresentative in theory.

Jascha Hoffman picks up this line of thought more recently in a piece for the *Paris Review* when he argues,

> That last "We," which never comes, is like a face cut out of a family portrait. But despite its admirable concision, "The Pool Players: Seven at the Golden Shovel" is not among her best poems. It seems melodramatic compared to an early sonnet on black soldiers returning from World War II, whose opening is as restrained as it is wrenching. (13)

Like Hall, though in a more combative register and with a not-unprecedented insistence that the poem's subtitle or note is its title proper, Hoffman divides Brooks's work not into "early" and "late" (post-1967) poems, as many critics have done, but into "We Real Cool" and other "melodramatic" pieces, on the one hand, and her "best poems" on the other. Hoffman finds "We Real Cool" simultaneously a concise example of a portraiture of excision and regrettably unrestrained. Rather than simply contradictory, however, such concerns on the part of wary critics are in fact symptomatic of the way in which brevity necessarily forces questions of representation into the foreground: When confronted by a small piece or excerpt, we are made to consider whether it counts as appropriately or sufficiently representative. Yet we might just as easily make the opposite case: that "We Real Cool" functions as definitely representative of Brooks's oeuvre. It ought not replace or overshadow the rest of her work, of course, but Brooks's best-known poem embodies crucial thematic and formal concerns of her work as a whole. That is, it might be understood more appropriately as a limit case (as a full, if in some ways extreme, embodiment) rather than as an outlier or anomaly. After all, at some level the poem's focus on the conundrums of representation *make* it representative: "We Real Cool" toys with the tricky first-personal plural, and its own wide circulation makes it difficult to pin down.

From a more practical perspective, however, it will still be useful to designate the specific ways in which Brooks's shortest major poem shares affinities with the rest of her work. One truth Hall and Hoffman critics are accessing in their assessments of "We Real Cool" as anomalous is the fact that Brooks is not, generally speaking, a poet of short poems. The majority of her most important poems are multiple pages ("Gay Chaps at the Bar," "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith," "Beverly Hills, Chicago") or chapbook-length ("The Anniad," "In the Mecca," *Riot*). Yet crucially, throughout her books and across the course of her entire career, Brooks very much is a poet of the short phrase and the short line. The construction of "We Real Cool" out of very short lines—the first is four words, the middle six are three words apiece, the final line just two—is less an anomaly than an extension of that general practice. "Miss Brooks often writes short, highly chiseled, one-idea lines," Arthur P. Davis observes. "Some only one word in length" (*From the Dark Tower* 192).

Indeed, over and over Brooks deploys a terse phrase or clipped line—as she does in "We Real Cool" itself—to generate momentum or variety, or to signal a shift within the given poem. Though frequently referred to as terse and concise by her reader, Brooks is rarely given due for exploring variable line-lengths or for her consistent fascination with the interruptive phrase. Many of Brooks's best-known poems exhibit these tendencies. An early poem, "the mother" (1945), which directly addresses abortion almost three decades before *Roe v. Wade* (1973), concludes with a first-person articulation that might read as sentimental or "melodramatic" if not for the preceding section and the catch-your-breath shifts in line-length at the very end: "Believe me, I know you, though faintly, and I love, I love you / All" (22). Capitalized pronouns such as "All," "We," and "One" in fact recur somewhat regularly as stand-alone single-syllable lines or abrupt line endings in a number of Brooks's poems. In a different vein, a late but almost equally well-known poem like "Third Sermon on the Warpland" (1969) alternates repeatedly between medium and very short lines, generated by aggressive breaks, to create a sense of movement and confusion: "Crazy flowers / cry up across the sky, spreading / and hissing *This is* / *it*" (473).

No single example is sufficient to demonstrate the centrality of the short line and short phrase to Brooks's practice, but from one angle her body of work as a whole might be viewed as an exacting experiment in the variety and possibilities of the very short, stand-out line as a technique. Not only her first three books, which have received the bulk of critical attention, but every one of her collections includes instances of this characteristic of Brooks's style.[116] In the work of a poet whose dominant métier is the short line (William Carlos Williams, for instance) or whose reputation is entwined with the play of short phrases across the page (E. E. Cummings, say) these examples would hardly stand out. Brooks's predilection for a governing line of three or more beats, however, lends her curtailed ones a striking character. Across them, we can discern certain patterns: monosyllables, words suggesting holism, an even-keeled pessimism. The most dominant effect, though, seems to be the way these lines and phrases punctuate the rhythms in which they reside, generating sonic variety or emphasis via contrast. Such moments stick out on the page, which increases their likelihood of sticking out in the mind. They create friction—a productive difficulty.

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[116] A partial list of Brooks poems with at least one example of a single-word or two-word line that disrupts the governing line-length of the poem as a whole would include the following (in addition to "We Real Cool" and "An Aspect of Love, Alive in the Ice and Fire"): "mother," "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith," and "Gay Chaps at the Bar" from *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945); "throwing out the flowers," "I love those little booths at Benvenuti's," and "Men of careful turns, haters of forks in the road" from *Annie Allen* (1949); "Strong Men, Riding Horses," "The Bean Eaters," "We Real Cool," and "Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat" from *The Bean Eaters* (1960); and "a surrealist and Omega," "The Chicago Picasso," "Third Sermon on the Warpland," "An Aspect of Love, Alive in the Ice and Fire," "Paul Robeson," "The Boy Died in My Alley," "A Primer for Blacks," "The Near-Johannesburg Boy," "The Coora Flower," and "An Old Black Woman, Homeless, and Indistinct" from the author's subsequent nine books (published between 1967 and 2013).

If the "short, highly chiseled" line or phrase, often standing out from the body of the poem or line in which it resides, registers Brooks's lifelong formal engagement with brevity, "shortness" understood more broadly and thematically is at the core of her practice. Her writing engages over and over with a variable *thematics of shortness or constraint*. That thematic tendency takes the form of a frequent and explicit concern with portraying everyday people, often sympathetically, though almost never heroically or idealistically. Both Brooks herself and critics such as Arthur Davis and Houston Baker have defined these characters, voices, and images using a variety of scalar adjectives and their nominalizations: "the littles," "Mrs. Small" (Brooks); "the unheroic," "small lives," "small creatures … no longer ashamed of their smallness" (Davis); "the anti-hero," "common folks" (Baker). Davis elaborates on this when he claims, "For her the modern world may be defined in one word—*unheroic*'" ("Gwendolyn Brooks" 114). Her people "lack bigness; we are little creatures contented with little things and little moments" (114). Here, in Davis's framework, the catchy commonplace has become the purely common.

We can see the formal and thematic engagements with brevity brought into conjunction even in a set-piece like "the old marrieds," with its regular meter and rhyme entailing lines of equal length. The poem appears as the very first in *A Street in Bronzeville*, so it in some ways marks Brooks's full entry into her career.

> But in the crowding darkness not a word did they say.
> Though the pretty-coated birds had piped so lightly all the day
> And he had seen the lovers in the little side-streets.
> And she had heard the morning stories clogged with sweets.
> It was quite a time for loving. It was midnight. It was May.
> But in the crowding darkness not a word did they say. (19)

Brooks's published body of work thus begins with a "But," followed by a contrast between seemingly ceaseless natural song and human silence. The paucity of communication between the elderly pair is not simply that of the loving couple whose members know each other so well that they can read each other's minds.[117] It is a more fundamental lack, the only redeeming quality of which seems to be that it is shared, which is to say silence is what they have, together, in the small space afforded them in a world of "crowding darkness," "little side-streets," and "clogged" stories. One of the problems of shortness that this poem indexes, then, is the dynamic relationship between brevity and proliferation. In this instance, a too-muchness—of bodies and "sweets" and "darkness"—crowds the limited space of streets that are not full streets. Even the doubling up in the phrase "little side-streets" serves to exemplify the way smallness and repetition are linked. A word such as "broad" might read as a necessary modifier; "little" serves to reinforce one implied meaning of "side-street" by enacting spatial crowding via verbal redundancy. What first seemed to be a distinctly even and long-lined poem, then, seems to shrink once we register its repetitions and redundancies. It opens and closes with the same line, a frame of spreading dark that squeezes the portrait it surrounds, whereas the "It was … It was … It was" pattern of the penultimate line accelerates that sense of overcrowding, as if the scene were closing in on itself. The immediate connotation is death, but not the heroic or mythological Death suggested by the poem's elevated phrasing ("not a word did they say" rather than "they said nothing," "piped so lightly" with its echo of Keats, "It was midnight. It was May" with its own of Herrick). It is rather a series of small encroachments leading to the inevitable, expected, common final silence of the characters. In the meantime, only the quiet "loving" and the little sentences lodged in that penultimate line provide variety and solace.

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[117] In the late poem "Shorthand Possible," Brooks addresses that stage of contentment directly: "A long marriage makes shorthand possible. / The Everything need not be said" (*The Near-Johannesburg Boy* 28).

Seeking to test our supposition that this conjunction of forms and thematics of shortness is central to Brooks's poetry, we can scrutinize an important work from her career that seems at first glance *not* to engage substantively with brevity. The not-quite-book-length titular poem from *In the Mecca* (1968) leaps out from her bibliography as an obvious contender. Yet even that work, which clocks in at over 30 pages, was dubbed a "*brief* epic" by one of the poet's most reliable readers (Melhem 240, emphasis added). Brooks herself saw the work (epic or otherwise) as emblematic of her attentiveness to linguistic detail. She reflects (in an expanded version of a quote we saw earlier), "I revise as much as I ever did. I still bend intently over the little phrase, as I said in 'In the Mecca.'" Worse still for our attempted challenge, the book's fractured narrative takes place entirely within the desperately tight physical spaces of an overcrowded four-story apartment complex. To frame that tale, which centers on the search for a missing child, Brooks's ironizes the historical transformation of the Mecca Building on Chicago's South Side. The building transforms from a "splendid" stone promise in the late-nineteenth century to a collection of under-maintained, low-rent apartments for individuals, couples, and families of color by the mid-twentieth (404). All this occurs, as the poem knows and suggests, by way of oppressive "redlining" practices. Architectural form is thus shaped—by Brooks in the poem, by discriminatory rental practices in reality—into a frightful literalization of structural racism.

If Brooks's "In the Mecca" reveals itself to be an extended depiction of social constriction, an earlier long poem that takes place on the road, rather than in suffocating rooms and hallways, might seem a suitable alternate contender for the work in her oeuvre least likely to examine brevity. "Beverly Hills, Chicago" takes places on a leisurely Sunday drive by a Black couple or family through a tony white suburb. Appearing toward the end of *Annie Allen* (1949), it is narrated or spoken in the first person plural. It is an almost ostentatiously prosaic, if sharply critical, observation piece that consists of eight ABCB quatrains, with a resting pulse of five-to-seven beats per line. Its longest line reaches twenty-nine syllables, and even its shortest ("We drive on, we drive on."), though reticent, is hardly wee (129).

Yet even in "Beverly Hills, Chicago" Brooks engages with the brief phrase in ways that allow her to invest the abstract quality of shortness with social meaning, further demonstrating the centrality to her poetic practice of both the technique and that thematic investment. The explicit economic and implicit racial distinctions between the observing speaker and the denizens of the neighborhood she observes are hinted at in the final line of the first stanza: "We say ourselves fortunate to be driving by today." The half-ironic "fortunate" suggests the gap between the expansive lawns cared for by handymen and the interloping occupants of the car. But that contrast does not become emphatic until the middle of the poem when a two-word sentence fragment interrupts its flow. Watching the locals "flow sweetly" from "their golden gardens" back into their homes, Annie remarks,

> We know what they go to. To tea. But that does not mean
> They will throw some little black dots into some water and add sugar and the
> juice of the cheapest lemons that are sold,
>
> While downstairs that woman's vague phonograph bleats, "Knock me a kiss."
> And the living all to be made again in the sweatingest physical manner
> Tomorrow. . . . Not that anybody is saying that these people have no trouble.
> Merely that it is trouble with a gold-flecked beautiful banner. (128)

The interruptive phrase—"To tea."—performs a good deal of poetic work. The previous sentences lead us to expect a glimpse into the interiors of the fancy houses, but the grammatical interruption disorients the narrative flow of the poem twice over. First, it moves us abruptly "back" to the neighborhood of Annie and her husband: a world of the "cheapest" lemons and tea, of unavoidable physical ("sweatingest") and auditory ("bleats") cramping. Second, it complicates the pronoun of “But that does not mean / they,” so that “these people,” with their well-kept, spacious properties of “wood and brick and stone,” are forced, by way of grammatical ambiguity, into the confines of the apartments to which the observers will return. The twofold-function of this attack of extreme brevity—it underscores the constraints of the disenfranchised areas of the city while simultaneously mobilizing an ironic, almost comedic, critique—is exemplary of how techniques of brevity function in Brooks’s writing.

The disorienting moment also highlights two other tendencies or effects that correlate with Brooks’s techniques of brevity. In her work, brevity and constraint are frequently linked to apparent opposites such as repetition and expansion. The five-beat, thirteen-syllable line cut in half by “To tea” is followed immediately by the poem’s longest, a mouthful which in most editions exceeds the page’s margins, forcing it to occupy two lines, and which recordings testify even Brooks herself had difficulty reading smoothly. Likewise, the fit-like prepositional doubling (“go to. To tea.”) reflects Brooks’s habit of repeating a word, exactly or otherwise, in close succession, as if the tightness of the form or the figured space were generating whatever minimal excess might be eked out. Repetition signifies both stuckness—shrinking the poem by repeating its elements too soon—and apparent extension. These moments of Eliotic repetition with minimal difference create a sensation of the poem simultaneously spreading outward while also folding in on itself.

The other highlighted tendency is Brooks’s fondness for the circulating phrase or quotation. The song lyric, “Knock me a kiss,” is the title and chorus of a 1941 rhythm and blues hit by Louis Jordan. That clip thus links race to both an overstuffed sonic atmosphere and to the possibility of phrases circulating beyond their immediate confines. It seems to leak into the poem and its speaker’s consciousness through the puncture created by “To tea,” much as Jordan’s tune seeps between apartments in the poorer parts of town. Exacerbating this sense of crowding and seepage are the poem's allusions to T. S. Eliot. The images ("dry brown coughing") and diction ("raggedly") generate an Eliotic tone, familiar to readers of the modernist lyric such as Brooks. The "vague phonograph" of this central passage is thus of a piece with the poem as a whole even as it stands as the most overt allusion to *The Waste Land* (1922). Recall the "young typist" of section three who "smooths her hair with automatic hand, / And puts a record on the gramophone"). As Juan A. Suárez notes, this "automatic" gesture of turning to recorded sound after "mechanical sex" captures how the modern discourse network of media and technologies in the era Suárez (following Friedrich Kittler) dates to "the media revolution of the 1880s to the 1920s" helped set the terms of both textual and sexual engagement of the era (752, 748). The typist's hand, "automatic" whether in front of a typewriter at work or whether confronted by the "arm," is both prefigured and called to its gesture by the mechanical "arm" of the gramophone.

In "Beverly Hills, Chicago," coming approximately thirty years later, the phonograph serves less as a symbol of mechanistic modernity, in which the feelings of human subjects have been desiccated down to the automatic gestures of body parts, than as a reminder of the unequal distribution of space, including the spaces through which sound travels. That can mean from one suffocatingly cramped flat to another, as "kiss" off-rhymes with "sweatingest," or from one social world to another, as when Jordan's tune momentarily seems to resonate in the lily-white Beverly. If the forces of the discourse network are nowhere more deterministic than in the worlds inhabited by those with the least physical, economic, and social mobility, the violence of the lyric, particularly in its excerpted form, comes to seem an affliction that carries with it—across not "vague" but all-too-distinct lines of race and class—a tone of subdued menace.

Another circulating and rewired phrase in "Beverly Hills" does the work of transforming the poem from a limited portrait of specific individuals to a sociological portrait by drawing on some of the most cutting-edge social research of the period. The scaling up of the poem from a portrait of a single Black family's experience to a broader set of observations—from a contrast between individuals to a contrast between distinct "worlds" within the larger expanse of Chicago—is brought home by Brooks's crucial revision of the poem's epigraph when it reappears in the stanza subsequent to the passage quoted previously.

> ("and the people live till they have white hair")
> E. M. Price
>
> […]
>
> Nobody is saying that these people do not ultimately cease to be. And
> Sometimes their passings are even more painful than ours.
> It is just that so often they live till their hair is white.
> They make excellent corpses, among the expensive flowers… (129)

Attributed to E. M. Price, a close friend of Brooks's husband Henry Blakely, the conversational phrase from the epigraph is marked as autonomous in multiple ways by its placement on the page as well as the attribution, quotation marks, and parentheses. In its second iteration, the phrase is folded into the body of the poem where it reveals significant minor revisions. We can explain this repetition with a difference in part in terms of Brooks's grammatical and metrical concerns. The line appears just beyond halfway through the poem, after the various subjects and pronouns have been made clear, thus "they live" replaces "the people live." Meanwhile, "Beverly Hills, Chicago" is in a loose iambic meter, veering freely between five and six lines, so the revision of the final clause from the rhythmically awkward "they have white hair," with its strong stresses clustered close together, to the fluid "their hair is white" is unsurprising. In fact, we might expect the straightforward rising rhythm of "It is *just* that they *live* un*til* their *hair* is *white*.” But the phrase “so often” is an addition, and it’s one which leaves a patch of metrical gunk toward the middle of the line: “It is *just* that so *of*ten they *live till* their *hair* is *white*.” Brooks’s tendency, rhythmically speaking, is toward the avoidance of too much regularity (especially outside of the ballads).

The addition of “so often,” however, not only generates rhythmic variety but also encapsulates the sociological perspective of the poem: It removes the original statement (the epigraph) from the realm of specificity (these particular “people”) to that of statistical regularity. The perspective shifts from a singular instance to a kind of repetition. The poem is in this way critically concerned with articulating a distinction between individual suffering (“Sometimes…”), which may vary as much as the overall texture of any given life, with the differences in average outcomes (“so often”). This framing places intersectionality at the core of the poem: In the context of the addended phrase “so often,” the long life symbolized by white hair is linked to the privilege of both racial whiteness and economic wealth.

In its revising of Price, the poem’s epigraph resonates with the work of sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton. One of the foundational texts of urban sociology, Drake and Cayton’s *Black Metropolis: Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945), examines the “color-line that segregates and subordinates” and “how black people live within that reality” (xvi). The study centers on the South Side of Chicago, and more specifically the expansive Bronzeville neighborhood in which Brooks lived and wrote and which serves as the setting for many of her poems, including those collected in her first book, published in the same year as *Black Metropolis*. In an early career interview, Brooks insisted, “I am not a social scientist … I am impressed constantly by my acquaintances that the important thing is to have statistics and I do not have statistics” (Angle 17). Yet her poetry betrays an ongoing concern with the truths embodied in the kinds of statistics presented and unpacked by Drake and Cayton; specifically, both bodies of work, albeit in very different manners, present reduced life expectancy as one of the central results and reinforcers of deep-seated racial inequality.

The conceptual backbone of Drake and Cayton's research is a distinction between the "Black Belt" or "Black Ghetto," the oppressively confined geographical and infrastructural spaces on the South Side of Chicago into which African Americans were forced by racist laws and racist norms, and the "Black Metropolis" or "Bronzeville," the partially autonomous and complexly differentiated world ("a city-within-a-city") emerging from the lived experiences, ambitions, and compromises of the area's citizens. But despite this dose of optimism built into the Black Metropolis's methodology and argument, many of the text's readers focused on its impressive and haunting detailing of inequality. Richard Wright, for one, emphasizes in his introduction to the book's first edition, the hard facts at the core of Drake and Cayton's analysis: "In no other city has the differentiation between groups and races been so clearly shown; nowhere has it been revealed so vividly, for example, how birth rates, death rates, etc., vary as people move out of the center of the city to its outer edges" (xix).

Wright's framing of Chicago's social geography in terms of center and periphery is cursory, leaving out for example the distant white enclaves just then beginning to emerge, which would become suburbs like Beverly. But his emphasis on the vast differentials in fortune, life, and death at play in different areas and among different races in post-Depression Chicago—and, later in his introduction, on the relationship of those statistics to "the reality" of his novel *Native Son* (1940) and his style of urban naturalism more broadly—captures the fine-grained portrait of inequality painted by Drake and Cayton. The sociologists note, for instance, that the death-rate (per 1,000) in the predominantly Black "lower class" parts of Chicago were as high as 21.4, in the years 1934-40, when the citywide death rate (for both Black and white residents) was less than half that at 10.2. The racial gap in mortality rates and expected lifespans improved only marginally over the next three decades. Meanwhile, the suburb of Beverly was growing into one of the wealthiest and most monochromatic areas of the larger Chicagoland area. In 1950, the year after Annie Allen was published, of Beverly's 20,186 residents, 20,165 were white, 16 were Black, and five identified as "Other" (Rob Paral and Associates).

The association in "Beverly Hills, Chicago" of white skin with "white hair," then, is hardly a hollow pun. The color links a statistical predictor of longevity to a symbol of that longevity, and the same goes for Brooks's modification of Price's remark. If Brooks is often read as a portraitist, presenting first-person personae and third-person descriptions of midcentury Chicagoans, her "so often" turns this depiction from a singular set of observations into a kind of composite portrait. Racial and economic privilege do not eliminate "trouble" or the possibility of a "painful" death, but the poem's speaker (Annie) insists that they do quite regularly ("so often") soften the blows (128-29).

More generally, the revision of Price's phrase insists that the abstract quality of shortness or "smallness," for Brooks, is always already imbued with social meaning. Abbreviated opportunities and resources are linked to abbreviated lives, and foreshortened lives are linked to foreshortened lines. In a famous remark, Brooks explains her use of off- or half-rhymes in her early sonnet sequence, "Gay Chaps at the Bar." Those poems focus on the racism and mistreatment faced by Black soldiers returning to America, and to "civil" life, after serving honorably in World War II. "It was an off-rhyme situation," Brooks said, in a remark that would prove enduring (Stavros 44). Likewise, the insistence on lineal irregularity, the interruptive brief phrase, and the violently truncated poetic line speak to the racist maldistribution of resources

Brooks's poems portray. The final stanza of "Beverly Hills, Chicago" enacts that inequality.

> Nobody is furious. Nobody hates these people.
>
> […]
>
> We do not want them to have less.
> But it is only natural that we should think we have not enough.
> We drive on, we drive on.
> When we speak to each other our voices are a little gruff.

The "raggedness" of these alternating lines of roughly four and seven beats, like the earlier description of tea-time, reinforces the way scarcity and proliferation go hand-in-hand. The opening line would seem to suggest a kind of pre-Civil Rights Movement vision of more resources divorced from any demands for redistribution: divorced from an insistence on "them" having any "less." Compare the explicit discussion of resource allocation in one the poem's key predecessors, "The Sunday of Satin-Legs Smith." That earlier poem, which alludes over and over to Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," posits—conditionally and trapped between a pair of em-dashes—a progressive, though not off-with-their-heads revolutionary, politics of redistribution:

> Ah, there is little hope. You might as well—
> Unless you care to set the world a-boil
> And do a lot of equalizing things,
> Remove a little ermine, say, from kings,
> Shake hands with paupers and appoint them men,
> For instance—certainly you might as well
> Leave him his lotion, lavender and oil.

On its surface, "Beverly Hills, Chicago," with its allusions to *The Waste Land*, seems to suggest that the kings can keep their ermine: "We do not want them to have less." Yet the unevenness of the lines; the repetition of "We drive on"; and the final word of the poem, which functions as do stage directions in a script or expression markings on a musical score, work in concert to push back against that seemingly straightforward, almost conciliatory claim. The concluding note, in emphasizing the coarse, abrupt tone of "our voices," asks us to read against the grain. The couple drives "on" and "on"—forward rather than "off" in another direction—even as the doubling of the phrase "We drive on" reproduces the frustration of their interpersonal communication and the immobility of their social position with respect to those they are leaving behind. Meanwhile, the "little" quotient of gruffness pushes against the poem's long-lined fluency. The speaker and her husband, to put it idiomatically, are "being short" with each other. Terse and perhaps uncivil, the tone of their conversation has been inflected by the white world of plenty they have just observed, but the change in tone is not trapped with them in the car or in their home or in their neighborhood. Tone expands. It spreads, and that final word, "gruff," in fact suggests the possibility of turning back and reading the stanza's first line with low-pitched, gravelly emphasis on the helping verb: "We do not want them to have less. / But […]" (129).

Brooks's "Beverly Hills" poem is political, then, in the precise sense of suggesting that the cramped situation of having "less" cannot be remedied without taking from those with more than enough. The phrase "it is only natural" repeats over and over toward the end of the poem, appearing once in each of the final three stanzas. It describes the couple, who "look and look," who "think" and "think," as if to call attention to the unnatural situation in which some are so "much more fortunate" than others. That the stakes of fortune are here literally life and death seeps into the poem, from the pointed revision of its epigraph, alluding as it does to average life expectancy rates, to the submerged menace of the line that follows, with its suggestive ellipsis: "They make excellent corpses, among the expensive flowers…" (129).

5. The Social Function of Shortness

Like “Beverly Hills Chicago,” “We Real Cool” marshals a range of techniques and symbols of brevity to link the broad social problem of unequal average expected lifespans to a specific affect. If gruffness is the tone middle-aged Annie and her husband direct at each other by the end of the earlier poem, “cool” is its younger, hipper cousin. Both affects rely on a kind of withholding or reticence. “Beverly Hills, Chicago” ends by expressing carefully managed class envy via a note of frustrated world-weariness. It grows into its tone. It proceeds from “saying” (“We say ourselves fortunate…,” “Not that anybody is saying…,” “Nobody is saying…”) to speaking gruffly “to each other,” with the quiver of animosity generated by the experience of the contrast between neighborhoods directed inward, between wife and husband, rather than outward toward the white residents of the wealthy suburbs.

“We Real Cool,” published in Brooks’s subsequent book of poems, gets to its tone quickly. The core affect is named at the outset, first in the title and then as the poem’s first sentence. We hear the restraint and composure associated with coolness not only in the speaker’s performance of carpe diem confidence but also in the poem’s array of technical marks of brevity: short lines, monosyllabic diction, sharp enjambments, unobtrusive alliteration, and more. The eight-line, twenty-four word poem repeats nothing except the “We” that opens line one and ends the subsequent seven.

By entwining those features with the scene of pool players who have “left school,” the poem invests the former with the fullest version of the themes outlined in our reading of the Beverly poem: limited resources and restricted lives. In the context of Brooks’s oeuvre as whole, and particularly its exploration of jagged line lengths and variations on the themes and techniques of brevity, the poem’s insistence on making technique *mean* (as “signify” but also as in “parsimonious”) undermines any easy distinction between a transparent understanding of the poem (as reflecting social reality) and a technical one (emphasizing its commitment to linguistic skill and modernist condensation). Even independent of that larger body of work, however, the poem in a quite basic sense makes its meaning via technique: it is the short lines and sharp enjambments that most fully capture the impending premature death, and so on. Technique is not an avoidance of the social; it is precisely the poem’s means of registering it.

As many commenters have noted, the tight angles of the poem’s appearance on the page reflect not only those explored by skilled players at the pool table but also the physical and social restrictions confronted by “The Men and Women of Bronzeville” (as Brooks’s working title for *The Bean Eaters* would have it) in the postwar era. This interpretation of the poem’s form and technical features—which might otherwise read as neutral, purely verbal, modernist, and so on—is enabled by the common associations we bring to the image of the pool table itself and the framing opposition between the public institution of the school and the commercial domain of the bar. Indeed, the confined indoor leisure space of the pool hall and its scale model, the billiards table itself, together remind us not only of the cramped apartments and all-but-belted neighborhoods that Brooks depicts explicitly elsewhere. They also remind us that the predictable interactions of pool balls make the game a common metaphor for determinism, in which the ricochets of the balls represent the predictable interactions of particles. The game of pool as shorthand for physical, or in this case social, determinism links up with the near inevitability of the poem’s deadly pull. The text is pulled forward by its own mechanisms of syntax and rhyme; as do the players, it seems to wind up precisely where it must.

The framing opposition the poem posits between the institution of the school and the space of the bar encourages this social determinist reading, and the historical context would seem to reinforce it. In its look back at the history of the Chicago Public School (CPS) system, the *Chicago Reporter* summarizes the situation in the year *The Bean Eaters* was published:

> 1960. The African-American population in Chicago now makes up 25 percent of the city, but racial segregation is high, and much of the South and West sides have become densely populated, marginalized, low-income areas. Chicago Schools Supt. Benjamin Willis [fl. 1953-66] uses portable buildings, commonly referred to as "Willis Wagons," to relieve overcrowding in African-American schools rather than enrolling the students in largely white schools nearby, causing widespread protests.[118]

The first "mobile classrooms" appeared as early as 1961, but well before then the public school system was strained to its limits and the black teenagers who seem to speak in "We Real Cool" would have been among the populations whose needs were least accounted for by funding and superintending priorities set out by CPS authorities in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954. By 1960, many Black students were attending school in four-hour "shifts" rather than for a full day; that fact alone forces us to read a phrase like "We / Left school" in a different light.[119] By 1963, local civil rights groups in coordination with Martin Luther King, Jr. were planning a "Freedom Day" protest over de facto school segregation. The boycott took place on Tuesday, October 22, and numbered approximately 225,000 participants.

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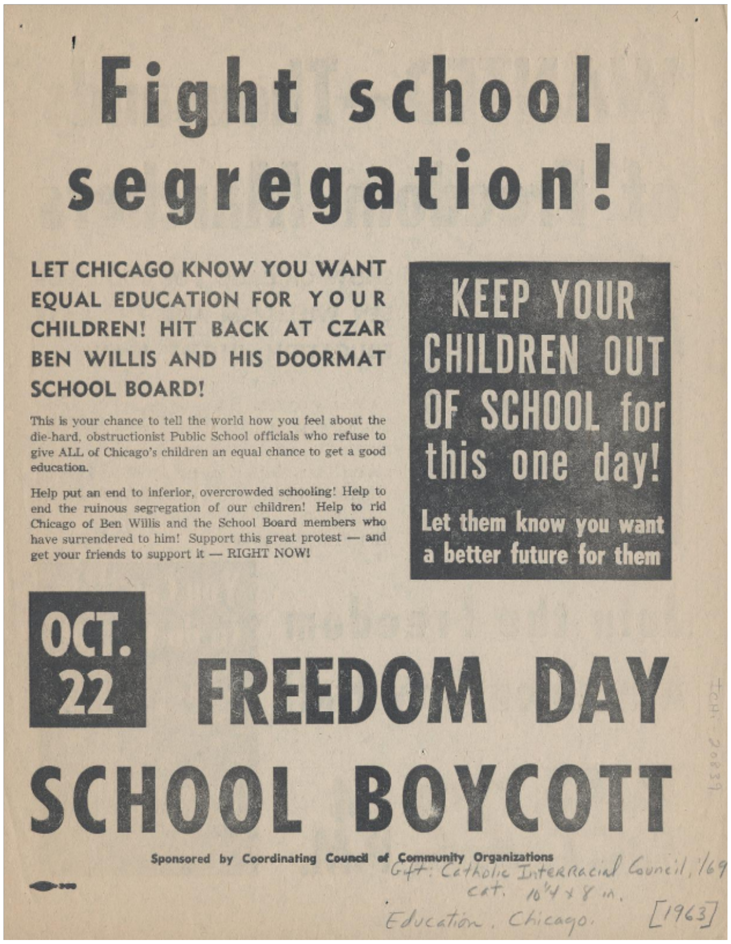
[118] The *Reporter* was founded in 1972 with funding from the Ford Foundation with the explicit goal of (as its tagline has it) "Investigating Race & Poverty." On the relationship between underfunded schools, unresponsive education officials, truancy, and gangs in the postwar era, see Braverman, 303-4.

[119] See Rury, 117-42b. See also Ewing, 80-81.

In the weeks prior, organizers distributed brochures advocating a politicized version of the truancy that an overly transparent reading of Brooks's poem might see it as critiquing.



Fight school segregation!

LET CHICAGO KNOW YOU WANT EQUAL EDUCATION FOR YOUR CHILDREN! HIT BACK AT CZAR BEN WILLIS AND HIS DOORMAT SCHOOL BOARD!

This is your chance to tell the world how you feel about the die-hard, obstructionist Public School officials who refuse to give ALL of Chicago's children an equal chance to get a good education.

Help put an end to inferior, overcrowded schooling! Help to end the ruinous segregation of our children! Help to rid Chicago of Ben Willis and the School Board members who have surrendered to him! Support this great protest — and get your friends to support it — RIGHT NOW!

KEEP YOUR CHILDREN OUT OF SCHOOL for this one day!

Let them know you want a better future for them

OCT. 22 FREEDOM DAY SCHOOL BOYCOTT

Sponsored by Coordinating Council of Community Organizations

Gift: Catholic Interracial Council, '69
cat. 10¼ x 8 in.
Education. Chicago. [1963]

ICHi-20839

Fig. 11. Freedom Day Flyer, 1963. (Credit: Chicago History Museum/Getty Images)

One such flyer reads, "KEEP YOUR / CHILDREN OUT / OF SCHOOL for / this one day!" (see Fig. 11). In this context, the tight black lines of "We Real Cool" and the expanse of white page-space to their right seem to embody, by way of a revealingly "gimmicky" literalization, the absurdly unequal distribution of public resources. That contrast in resource allocation between Black South Siders and their white peers was exacerbated by the dismantling of crucial facilities at the beginning of the Cold War, from public institutions fostered by the New Deal to private ones underwritten by the Jules Rosenwald Fund (Bone 228-32).

If “We Real Cool” raises the question of responsibility for school absenteeism, the ambiguity of its first standard verb underscores its refusal to provide easy answers. The poem is sometimes quoted inaccurately as “We real cool. We / skipped school,” but “skipped” is at once less permanent (as in playing hooky for a day) and more playfully active. The verb “left” suggests the permanence of dropping out, a sly slipping out, or even just leaving at the end of the day, and the ambiguity it presents is enhanced by the time of year. Like most school systems in the United States, CPS has in most eras concluded its school year in June, often toward the beginning of the month. The poem thus opens a gap between the speakers and the narrative reality of their situation, which the reader may rush to fill by way of assumption, but conveying experience of that rush is very much part of the poem’s work. That is, readers may assume delinquency on the part of the speakers and read that as either bold, political, immoral, or otherwise. The speakers, then, seem to play off the possibility of assumptions about them, where they should be, and when, as much as they seem to be bragging or hesitatingly asserting their own agency.

A different gap in the poem underscores the way it engages with expectations. Whereas “Beverly Hills, Chicago” ends on a note of the two members of “we” “being short” with each other, “We Real Cool” is overtly interested in being literally short, and it concludes by pulling up short in a manner that is not exclusively or even primarily tonal: “Jazz June. We / Die soon.” The weakness of the final “We” syllable in the first seven lines is elicited by the strong rhyming monosyllables that precede it (“late,” “straight,” etc.) and emphasized by Brooks in her performances of the poem. That displacement of stress from its expected position at the end of the line makes text an example of poetic *syncopation*, and that “Jazz” effect, both in its meaning of displacing beats and its etymology in the Greek (*koptein*) for “strike, cut off,” highlights the violent mistiming of the death at the end. The “missing” final syllable the poem has taught us to be ready for by way of its rhyme scheme leaves a gap on the page after “soon,” reflecting the unfulfilled expectations the poem’s narration and lineation have created for an explicit final action (which has not happened quite yet, by the poem’s temporal logic) *and* for that action’s opposing signifier: another “We.” At the same time, that gap is generated by the smooth fulfillment of other expectations emerging from the rhyme scheme and the standards of indicative grammar. The interpretive pocket generated by this tension between fulfilled and unfilled formal and narrative expectations is suggestive of the forces, both internal and external, pulling the poem’s “players” toward untimely deaths.

In a brief essay titled “The End of the Poem,” Giorgio Agamben defines poetry as the possibility of enjambment. Only the potential of opposing “a metrical limit to a syntactical limit” (alternately: “a prosodic pause to a semantic pause”), for Agamben, generates the state or discourse of poetry (109). At one level, this argument is second-nature to most readers of verse attuned to tracking the fluctuating relationship between sound and sense in a given text; at another, its reliance on examples and terminology from the Italian tradition, and particularly from the era of Dante, might seem to restrict its purview. At the very least, its claims (unless significantly amended) would only seem to have purchase on poems written in relatively regular meters. Yet Agamben’s thesis is both precise and useful to the extent that it underscores the problem that gives the essay its title: namely, the poem’s “end.” In its account, as the poem closes it cannot but fail to remain poetry because it must conclude with a reconciling of syntax and meter. Enjambment is always possible except in a poem's final line.[120]

Agamben's targeting of a poem's final moments (its concluding line, its "end") is helpful with respect to "We Real Cool" because it highlights one result of the poem's unique form. Brooks's text both exists within the domain of poems that might reasonably be admitted to the theoretical purview of "The End of the Poem," and yet it slips out of the conundrum Agamben identifies precisely by being so carefully crafted. I mean this precisely: By opening the poem with the same word that ends each of its first seven lines ("We"); by selecting a word for that position that can only appear at the end of a sentence in highly unusual formations (e.g., when the word we reference the token "We," in which case it is normally set off from the main body of the text by way of punctuation or formatting); and by organizing the syntax, syllable count, and rhyme scheme such that the final line (the point at which, in Agamben's reading, the text no longer qualifies as poetry) must conclude just where we might expect another enjambment, Brooks builds a form that loops back on itself.

> Jazz June. We
> Die soon. We
>
> Real cool. We
> Left school. We
>
> Lurk late, etc.

In the above guise, in an inversion of Agamben's argument, the poem simultaneously manages to "end" while *remaining* poetry because the possibility of enjambment hangs open, and refuses to end because it continues to circle back on itself, over and over. The first "We," we might say, fits precisely into the gap after "soon" much as a pool ball fits into a pocket. Simultaneously, the representational content of the poem both elicits and complicates such a reading. Eight is a significant number in American-style pool (known as "eight-ball"), which concludes when a player wins by pocketing the number "8" ball itself. The poem's headnote—"The Pool Players. Seven at the Golden Shovel."—provides the referent for the text's plural pronoun and highlights the missing final (eighth) "We," suggesting that one of the chorus members has already died and is being elegized in song (331). Simultaneously, that missing pronoun, which is of course waiting at the very beginning of the poem, hints at the possibility of escape, as if a ball had skipped off the table, or (in manner more in line with skilled play) at the possibility that the game in progress is one of the popular twentieth-century forms of "continuous pool" such as 14.1, commonly known as straight pool. Straight pool was invented in or around 1910, and Brooks's players (who, recall, claim to "Strike straight") date to the late 1950s when the game was at its zenith.[121] Straight pool then served as the standard for professional championship competition, and by 1961 it was reaching audiences who had never picked up a cue in their lives after being featured in both the commercially successful and critically acclaimed film *The Hustler* and in an episode of the popular television show *Twilight Zone* set in a Chicago pool hall (Dyer 244). Notably, in any game of so-called continuous pool, the balls are re-racked *before* the table is fully clear, and this "intragame rack" most commonly occurs when only two objects (the cue and one standard ball) remain on the table: "Die soon."

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[120] A parallel tension in fiction between story and narration would seem to complicate Agamben's argument.

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[121] On the history and technicalities of cue sports, see *Billiards, Revised and Updated* and Nauright, 38-39. Dyer provides relevant context in his colorful discussion of the American player Willie Mosconi: "In 1919, when Joseph Mosconi first took note of his son's preternatural talent, the game then taking root in America was 14.1 Continuous—also known as straight pool. It had become the official game of pocket billiards the year before Willie's birth, and as the boy grew to dominance, so too did the game. Prior to the 1960s, straight pool would define the game's greatest champions; it was the only game featured in national-class tournaments; it was the only sort seen on TV. Not eight-ball, not nine-ball. For fifty years at least, straight pool *was* pocket billiards" (26).

If the metaphorics of pool help open up a reading of “We Real Cool” that emphasizes looping or circulation as much as limit or constraint, we might continue down this interpretive path with the poem’s other details, but the central point is that the compulsion the text creates at its “end” for the yet another “We,” that pull of repetition as it begs to be reread, parallels the desire for the next game, the next drink, the next round of the tune of the sinful song. This approach to “We Real Cool” underscores one of the key indices of the short or small aesthetic object: Relative lack in and of itself has the potential to generate interpretive excess, and that excess can in certain instances be less inhibited the fewer specifics there are to “rule out” possible readings. Imagine, for example, that Brooks’s poem had included additional information specifying that the “Players” are engaged in a game of billiards, which generally features only three balls, has no pockets, and offers a very different kind of continuity. Imagine the poem with an additional couplet: “We / Thin gin. We / Sing sin. We / Pour one. We / Cry ‘done.’ We…” Extension (particularly if poorly done) seems to *foreclose* certain possibilities.

Yet even absent the analogy to a continuous game of pool, “We Real Cool” asks to be read in terms of circulation by activating a set of musical references. Its plural voice (“We / Sing… We / Jazz”), its regular rhyme and rhythm, the syncopation suggested by its enjambments, and its allusion to nursery rhymes all bring music into play. More specifically, we can hear the poem as a “round” or a “catch,” musical forms that allow multiple voices (generally three or more) to sing the same (or similar) themes but to start at different times, with harmonies and other effects generated by built-in pauses and overlaps within the text(s). Those forms emphasize repetition and duration and often have no clear end points. Temporality is extinguished, as if “soon” and “so on” had become so proximate as to be identical.

One effect of the poem's approximation music is to highlight what is perhaps the most powerful and least remarked on aspect of a short text: its iterability. "We Real Cool" plays into its own portability, memorability, and re-readability through its circular form and its resemblance to the text of a traditional round or a catch. That emphasis on repetition also plays into and underscores what many critics refer to as the poem's use of "vernacular." If certain of its features correlate with linguistic descriptions of Black English, the opening phrase is perhaps best understood not as transcription, as bell hooks would have it, but as a "synthetic vernacular" and a crafty deployment of the word "real": one that winks at our tendency to read the poem as a reflection of a lived reality while conscripting that adjective into double-duty as a verb (Hart 11). After all, returning to the phrase "We real cool" after having cycled through the poem once, we might be tempted to misread "real" in this way. As the only nonstandard construction, it better fits the grammatical pattern the poem subsequently creates if we read the adverb or adjective as instead an action word: "We *real* cool" as in "We manifest cool. We create it."[122] Making or "realing" cool into existence is after all what happens in the players' performance. The autonomy of the players and of the circle-like poem itself thus come to model the closed-off circulatory nature of "cool" as an aesthetic that catches or spreads in part by way of its unknowability.

Ease of repetition is what we might call "the social function of shortness."[123] If "We Real Cool" seems to be fundamentally about shortness (of line, of opportunity, of tone), it simultaneously seems to both come from and arrive at a kind of diffusive repetition. If by being about circulation the text seems to read its own future—a future in which it would become both one of the most anthologized English-language poems of the last twenty-five years and provide the title for a "female-fronted action comedy" television series produced by AGC Studios—that future speaks to the drawbacks of such success (Welk n.p.). The representational limits of a short text become especially problematic when that text is ubiquitous, and worries about the ubiquity of a single text become especially loud when that text is tiny. Attesting to this are the frequent concerns expressed by Brooks's readers (in language that echoes Hall's) over "how she's anthologized … how she's … popularly represented"; the "supposed representativeness" of "We Real Cool"; and whether that very short poem and "a handful of other short, colloquial, frequently anthologized poems adequately represent the scope and depth of [her] accomplishment" (Fox n.p.; Bloom 55; Bolton 57).

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[122] Recordings of Brooks reading the poem lend credence to this reading. The two most distinctive features of those readings are her abbreviated enunciation of "We" and her elongated articulation of "real." The latter emphasis expresses the genial irony characteristic of much of Brooks's writing while also destabilizing the grammatical position of the word in question.

[123] A more circumscribed version of this concept would be "the institutional function of shortness": The way in which brevity makes a text suitable for anthologies, syllabi, and instruction.

By way of its "shifty pronoun," "We Real Cool" necessarily engages with questions of if and how a part can ever adequately represent a larger whole, and those concerns were demonstrably practical ones for Brooks herself (Bloom 55). Her remarks, over the course of interviews and readings from the late 1960s through her death in 1996, are illuminating at face value and for what they reveal about her own ambivalence about the poem. Consider her introduction to a live reading of the poem she gave at the Guggenheim in New York in 1983: "I guess I'd better offer you "We Real Cool." Most young people know me only by that poem. I don't mean I dislike it. But I would prefer it if the textbook-compilers and anthologists would assume I'd written a few other poems [laughs]" (n.p.).

Brooks is acutely aware of the ways and situations in which her "poems" as a collective are reduced to a single brief example, and it is easy to empathize with her genial frustration. Yet that frustration is notably circumscribed. Brooks is always willing to read her greatest hit, and her phrasing at the Guggenheim enhances that generosity: “I don’t dislike it,” she says, with the unfixed pronoun suggesting that she is amenable to both the poem itself and its popularity. Elsewhere, Brooks even singles out her most ubiquitous work as being perhaps the only poem that comes close to achieving what she is pursuing in the later part of her career. She admits in 1977 interview with Gloria Hull and Posey Gallagher,

> I haven’t written *anything* yet that seems to be just the kind of thing I want to achieve. I want it to be song-like in nature, something that can be easily transported from one person to another with enjoyment. It’s a *very* difficult task. (85)

Following up, the interviewers inquire, “What have you written that approximates most closely what you’re trying to achieve? You say you haven’t quite gotten to it yet; but what’s the closest thing to it?” And Brooks relents, “I can’t say complete poems except perhaps for ‘We Real Cool,’ and I can’t write a thousand ‘We Real Cool’s’” (85). The poem’s brevity and the tightness of its form make it amenable to actual (“most young people know me…”) and imagined (“a thousand ‘We Real Cool’s”) reproduction while simultaneously undermining any attempts to treat it as a recyclable approach. The pressures of workmanship and circulation enacted by extreme brevity coincide almost exactly in Brooks’s retrospective assessment of her poem.

The 1970s interview is where Brooks articulates most clearly how that overlap is precisely the space in which she thinks through a central goal (perhaps *the* central goal) of her poetics: balancing the modernist demand for “unique expressions” (Hull and Gallagher 88)—by which she means distinctive, highly formed turns of phrase that resist the risks of cliché—with a competing demand for an almost “traditional” reach into “tavern[s]” and among populations "who have grown up feeling that they hate poetry" (86, 88). "I happen to think," she explains, "that the valid poem that I want to write (because it will probably have valid itemata) can *be significant for the unique word and still be accessible to all manner of life*" (86, emphasis added). When pushed, she reiterates that her broadest success is the one that comes closest to this stated ideal: "The one poem I can keep recalling is 'We Real Cool,' but I almost hate to recall it though because [if] I wrote ten poems that sounded like 'We Real Cool,' 'We Real Cool' would lose whatever effectiveness it has." The "difficult task" of writing something that can satisfy both that demand for verbal intricacy (a demand Brooks associated with her careful reading of the modernists) and the populist goal of producing poetry that can be "easily transported" is what "Cool" itself indexes.

Brooks would even go so far as to read the poem's most striking device—the severely enjambed "shifty" plural pronoun—as achieving those apparently opposed goals. Compare two different explanations she gave for the poem's form, in interviews conducted in 1969 and 1988, respectively:

> [The seven pool players] have no pretensions to any glamour. They are supposedly dropouts, or at least they're in the poolroom when they should possibly be in school, since they're probably young enough or at least those I saw were when I looked in a poolroom, and they…. First of all, let me tell you how that's supposed to be said, because there's a reason why I set it out as I did. These are people who are essentially saying, "Kilroy is here. We are." But they're a little uncertain of the strength of their identity. [Reads: "We Real Cool."] The "We"—you're supposed to stop after the "We" and think about validity; of course, there's no way for you to tell whether it should be

> said softly or not, I suppose, but I say it rather softly because I want to represent their basic uncertainty, which they don't bother to question every day, of course. (Stavros 44)

> Your listeners might be interested in knowing why I put a "we" at the end of each line until you get to the last line. First, when I first wrote the poem, oh, so many years ago, I said, "We real cool / we left school / we learned late." But then it occurred to me that these are youngsters; that's why I wrote the poem really. These are youngsters who don't have much attention. They would like some attention. They'd like to be looked at with some respect and affection by their society. So I decided to put the "we" at the end so that you have to pause just a split second and give them just a split second's worth of attention. (Presson 133-34)

In the 1980s, Brooks links the poem's line breaks to catchiness. In revising her "First" draft, we are told she substitutes "lurk" for "learned," thereby intensifying the performativity of the speakers and adding a dash of subdued menace. More broadly, she takes the rhythm of rote recitation ("we left school / we learned late") and injects a series of skippy jolts ("We / Left School. We / Lurk late"). Her rationale for these changes is that they express the desire of "the youngsters" to be "looked at with some respect and affection." This positions the breaks as drawing visual "attention": as something that catches the eye. They express the desire of the pool players for attention from "their society," and they help generate popularity for the poem itself.

In the earlier interview, however, Brooks frames her formal decisions as the means by which she complicates the surface expressions of the poem's plural speaker. She "set it out" in a manner that attempts to undermine their overt expressions of confidence, and in her public readings she sounds that attempt by reading each “We” quietly and quickly. The enjambments, in this telling, are not meant to draw attention but to make the reader or listener “stop … and think” in order to “question” the apparent certainty of the players in a way they themselves do not regularly do. In this light, the harsh line breaks are examples of modernist defamiliarization: they attract a slow and questioning kind of attention that encourages the reader to contemplate the complexity of the plural speaker, in this poem and more broadly. Saying or hearing each pronoun “softly” substantially ambiguates the sense and sentiment of the text and, in so doing, diverts our interpretive attention in multiple directions.

We now have some insight into the success of “We Real Cool.” Brooks manages not only to solve a problem that mattered to her by way of “shortness” but also to generate, in a single gesture, both catchiness and difficulty. The poem thus serves as a reminder that those two qualities are not always or necessarily in opposition. That truism has been remarked upon before by a range of different thinkers, but one of my favorite statements of the point, because it is so straightforward, is from a 2017 interview Stephen Greenblatt gave while discussing the viral success of the Adam and Eve myth from the Book of Genesis. He argues that the story is effective, “it seizes you, and that become unforgettable” because, in its “tiny compass” and with great “narrative vitality,” it takes on “the problems that are impossible to solve” (Silverblatt n.p.). If Greenblatt is at one level referring to metaphysical “problems,” he makes clear that he believes that the conundrums generated by the “impossible” logic of the “tiny” story are themselves partially responsible for making the myth so catchy:

> You mustn’t eat of the fruit lest you die, says the God to the first human. How would they have known what death is? How could they possibly have known it? They lived in a

> world without death. And again that problem has haunted interpretations of the story for a very long time. We think… lazily that what we want in our myths is something transparent and simple. But *what we want in our great myths is the opposite: the things that we can't so easily swallow and at the same time we can't spit out*.

"We Real Cool" (without of course attaining the reach of the story of Genesis) harbors precisely the stickiness or catchiness highlighted by Greenblatt, as evidenced by its dramatic success across different eras and media in comparison to the vast majority of American poems, very short or otherwise. In this light, Brooks's repeated referencing of a quite different, mid-twentieth-century viral phenomenon is telling. Specifically, she brings up the "Kilroy Was Here" phenomenon in direct relation to "We Real Cool," both in the 1969 interview quoted previously and then again in her fragmented 1972 autobiography. Brooks attests in the latter, "The ending WEs in 'We Real Cool' are tiny, wispy, weakly argumentative 'Kilroy-is-here' announcements. The boys have no accented sense of themselves, yet they are of a semi-defined personal importance. Say the 'We' softly" (*Report From Part One* 185).

"Kilroy Was Here," the folk phrase whose verb Brooks tweaks from "was" to "is," was and remains a popular slogan. It is often inscribed in public places, and it usually accompanied by a simple drawing (see Fig. 12). This proto-meme likely emerged in an early form around the time World War I, but it took off in the American context during and after WWII. We can attribute the popularity and endurance of "Kilroy Was Here" in part to its graffiti-like "coolness" inasmuch as it retains a whiff of Liu's "ethos of the unknown" with respect to both its origin and its significance. When Brooks describes her poem's speakers as "essentially saying, 'Kilroy is here. We are,'" she reads the slogan as a more-or-less straightforward assertion of presence and "validity" (from the Latin for "strong"), recalling her strange locution in the 1977 interview: "valid itemata." In doing so, she positions her poem's enjambing of the pronouns as partially undercutting that certainty in order to capture the indeterminate and unaccented ("tiny, wispy, weakly argumentative") sense the young characters actually have of themselves, as adolescents and as members of a world that both ignores and oppresses them.

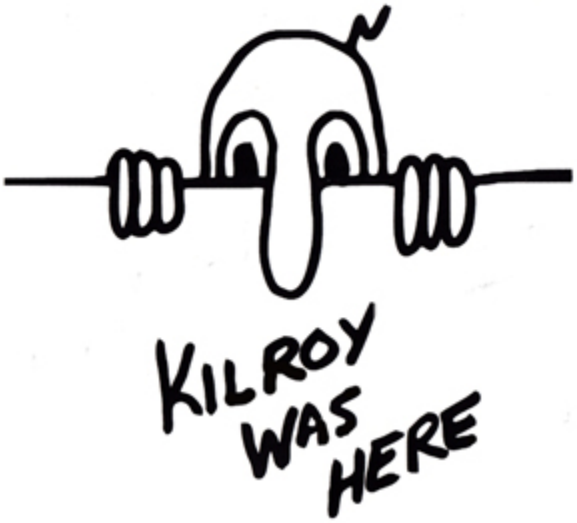

Fig. 12. "Kilroy Was Here" example. (Credit: Patrick A. Tillery)

The "Kilroy" reference, like Brooks's stylized manner of reading the poem aloud, helps us to hear the performative nature of this "tiny" and partial assertion of power by the relatively powerless, and to contemplate that that assertion comes by way of embracing a kind of powerlessness. In so doing, it calls attention to the dependence of the apparently autonomous players on other sources: a "cool" aesthetic that began to be labeled and circulated in the 1940s; a series of self-repetitions (of "We real cool" and of the pronoun itself); and perhaps on specific instances of the word "cool," such as "real cool" from the song "Cool" in *West Side Story*

(1957).[124] Whether we understand Brooks's poem as a rewriting and complicating of that line from *West Side Story*'s jazziest number, the sense that the poem's speakers are fashioning themselves, haltingly, out of small phrases and resources around them prevails.[125]

"We Real Cool," then, functions as an interrogation of circulation at multiple levels. Brooks explicitly (and repeatedly) compares the saying or singing of "We"-statements by the pool players to the scrawling of "Kilroy was here," but in so doing she also intimates that her poem has become something of a Kilroy-esque cultural artifact itself. By the 1970s, even she has difficulty imagining a world in which it does not already exist. Looking back at *The Bean Eaters*, she comments, "It always surprises me when I remember that "We Real Cool" is in there. I keep thinking that it came earlier" (Hull and Gallagher 96). Brooks speaks here as if "We Real Cool" has been around forever because it has already caught on. That sensibility is captured more obliquely in the eerie presentism of her seemingly unintentional revision of the famous slogan: not "Kilroy was here" but "Kilroy *is* here," she says (emphasis added). This shrewd updating speaks to the problem of shortness that "We Real Cool" indexes most thoroughly: the capacity of the short text to spread far and wide to the point where it can seem omnipresent and unavoidable.

In her best-known poem, Brooks combines her commitment to the two related but opposing meanings of littleness (everyday people, "restricted" circumstances) with an adroit

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[124] The association between Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim's "Cool" and Brooks's "We Real Cool" is arguably relevant no matter the chronology, but it is at least possible Brooks had "Cool" in mind, consciously or otherwise, when crafting her poem. *West Side Story*, by Arthur Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim, opened on Broadway in September 1957. The original Broadway cast recording was released the following month and sold well enough to be eventually certified Gold, whereas Brooks's poem was not published until late 1959.

[125] Brooks in fact nods to her indebtedness to musicals, and to the mixed stickiness of musical lyrics in particular, early in the second installment of her autobiography, *Report From Part Two* (1996): "What NEVER? Well, hardly evER. (Thanks, Gilbert and Sullivan.)" (16). Earlier, in a dense passage from the end of *Report From Part One*, she begins a list of influential films and theatrical productions with *West Side Story* itself: "Taking our places in the Play, which of us knows it is a play? Exist, fanfare. Flags, drums. Which of us understands that these clothes are costumery? / Never do we know the name is 'West Side Story;' 'Command Decision;' 'Five Easy Pieces;' 'The Good Earth;' 'Diary of a Mad Housewife;' 'Twelve Angry Men.' 'Cabaret.'" (199).

answer to the problem of reconciling modernism with populism. “We Real Cool” navigates the potential held by textual mobility, especially for the least mobile segments of the population. Brooks herself summarizes this reconciliation when she states, in a different interview from 1973, “*Shortness, for me, is part of the solution*” (Fuller et al. 69, emphasis added). Indeed, one of my central claims thus far has been that “shortness” is in fact a quite large and complex part of her solution. It allows her to suture the production-side modernist demand for condensation to a circulation-side populist ethic.

Yet the lively circulation of “We Real Cool” across different eras and media also highlights the pitfalls of ubiquity. At the limit of omnipresence, a brief text approaches a kind of immediacy very different from the type discussed earlier: not a transparency where the text seems to transcribe reality but one where sheer proliferation (or total socialization) seems to “thin” the text entirely—both its content and its form. If we try to envision this horizon of ubiquity, we might see the poem circling in on itself and diffusing so widely that it can only signify itself over and over. If I have tried to push back against that tendency in my reading of the poem in terms of multiple dimensions of brevity, it is a contemporary poet who has managed to most fully re-embed “We Real Cool.” In creating a novel poetic form he calls the “golden shovel,” Terrance Hayes manages to return the mediacy of Brooks’s poem without reducing it to a list of technical features.

6. Translucent Cool

One of the most intriguing artifacts to emerge from the recent centennial celebrations for Gwendolyn Brooks is *The Golden Shovel Anthology: New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks* (2017). Running to just under 300 pages, the collection is in certain respects quite ordinary.

Together, its foreword and three separate introductions (one written by each of the anthology's three editors) highlight Brooks's abundant achievements and wide-ranging influence, particularly on Black aesthetics and poets of color. Its contributions vary, from tours de force by accomplished writers—both emerging (Jericho Brown, Francine J. Harris, Danez Smith, Timothy Yu) and established (Joy Harjo, A. Van Jordan, Joyelle McSweeney, Eileen Myles, Evie Shockley, Tracy K. Smith)—to purely occasional pieces and poems by high school students, some of whom will doubtless continue writing and publishing for many years to come.

What sets *The Golden Shovel* apart is its organizing principle: Each piece is written in a poetic form less than a decade old. That form, the "golden shovel," was invented by Terrance Hayes as he was working on his fourth collection of poems, *Lighthead* (2010), which would go on to receive the National Book Award for Poetry.[126] In his introduction to a very different recent anthology, *Lark in the Morning: The Verses of the Troubadours* (2005), editor and translator Robert Kehew imagines the field of poetic forms as a half-lost landscape of flora and fauna. "As we explore the vast field of English letters," he writes, "sometimes we encounter a form—a sonnet or an ode, a villanelle or a sestina—to which poets turn repeatedly and whose usage continues back through generations until it disappears in the mists of the past. When was that form first used, we may ask? When was a sestina not a template but just an original poem whose unusually felicitous arrangement of meter and rhyme invited later emulation?" (xi). Kehew's questions express the excitement of (re)discovery backed by a note of forlornness.

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[126] The first edition of *The Golden Shovel Anthology* contains 297 examples of the form written by nearly as many different poets. (Sharon Olds, with three contributions, is the only author to appear more than once.) Twenty-one of those examples were published, concurrently with the release of the anthology, as a special subsection of the February 2017 issue of *Poetry* introduced by editor Don Share. A number of compelling examples of the form not connected with the anthology or solicited by its editors have been published both before and after the book's publication. In addition to Tyehimba Jess's "The Dunbar-Booker Double Shovel" (2016), which I discuss subsequently, notable examples include LaWanda Walters's "Goodness in Mississippi" (2013), which generated both an essay-length author's note and the attention of critics such as Stephanie Burt, and a pair written by Emma Vallelunga, which she discusses in her contribution to *The Whiskey of Our Discontent* (2017).

After all, *Lark in the Morning's* editorial apparatus and its examples of "the veritable Cambrian explosion of poetic forms that appeared" in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are emphatically partial answers to Kehew's inquiries regarding origins (8). The conundrum of when a form was "first used," much like that of what constitutes an "original poem," is of course not only historically but theoretically fraught. Reading *The Golden Shovel Anthology*, however, we may sometimes feel we are approaching an asymptote at which that question is answered in full.

In the note to his "original" examples, Hayes describes the constraints he elected to follow: "'The Golden Shovel' is, as the end words suggest, after Gwendolyn Brooks's 'We Real Cool'" (*Lighthead* 94). The epigraphic reminder above the text of the poem itself reiterates the phrase "after Gwendolyn Brooks," and in an annotation to a subsequent example of the new form (written "after" Elizabeth Alexander) in the same book, Hayes elaborates that "the end words come from her poem." The initial poem in fact runs through the entirety of "We Real Cool" twice, first in a section titled "1981" and then in one titled "1991" (6-7, 7-8). The former begins and ends as follows:

> When I am so small Da's sock covers my arm, we
> cruise at twilight until we find the place the real
>
> men lean, bloodshot and translucent with cool.
> His smile is a gold-plated incantation as we
>
> drift by women on bar stools, with nothing left
> in them but approachlessness. This is a school
>
> […]
>
> how sometimes a tune is born of outrage. By June
> the boy would be locked upstate. That night we
>
> got down on our knees in my room. If I should die
> before I wake. Da said to me, it will be too soon.

To follow suit by borrowing a phrase, we might call Hayes's poem "the most adequate critique" of Brooks's (North, "The Sign of Five" 340). By the logic of the form, his poem must be 24 lines and longer than Brooks's original, but in electing to double that Hayes reminds us of Brooks's own grasp of the tight relation between reduction and expansion. "The Golden Shovel" also echoes Brooks's interest in the "so small," and specifically the relationship between individuals and larger forces, here both parental and structural. The traps of incarceration and the cycles of violence and song loom large in the poem, recalling the forms of circularity and constraint in "We Real Cool." And the inevitability of each line-ending "We," as well as of the poem's final deadly rhyme, is mirrored in "The Golden Shovel" by the certainty that each line will end with the next word from Brooks's original. The back half of Hayes's poem ("1991"), meanwhile, takes the invented form in the direction of "lyric experiment" as opposed to "narrative responses"; in a number of minor ways, it pushes at the constraints of the form of which it serves as only the second instance (Kahn xxix). Certainly, its own circular phrasing ("What we / know is what we know") and its haunting images of reduction ("Groomed on a die- / t of hunger, we end too soon") again echo Brooks.

Beyond "a tribute" to Brooks and an insightful reading of "We Real Cool," what does the golden shovel, as a novel poetic form, reveal? To answer that question it is helpful to turn to Hayes's account of its invention. The twenty-four words of Brooks's lyric wind their way down the right-hand margin of Hayes's twelve couplets, and those couplets, in turn, make up one half of the "The Golden Shovel." The poetic form that Hayes has invented here is thus doubled from the outset. In his foreword to the anthology, he remarks, "Because where do poems come from if not other poems? Where after all do new forms come from if not other forms?" (xxvii). The plural nouns in Hayes's pair of rhetorical questions are revealing, and the doubling they point toward at the "origin" of the golden shovel form is suggestive. The form itself bears some family resemblances with the *cento* and the *glosa*. The former, dating back to Roman antiquity, describes poems composed entirely of lines from other works; the latter, originating in the Renaissance, opens with a four-line stanza from another author, each line of which is then repeated once at the end of the subsequent four stanzas. More broadly, the golden shovel has affinities with techniques such as allusion, citation, and collage.

Meanwhile, its emphasis on "end words" can be understood as a rewriting of one of poetry's most fundamental sonic features, end-rhyme, and more immediately of Hayes's own earlier experiments with line-endings in his anagram poems:

> How to make a nation say, *uncle*.
> In other words: how to rule.
> […]
>   flash like an ulcer
> bursting in God's gut. Citizens race
> about the city as the sky becomes a caul-
> dron. The bones burned clean.

Each line of the above poem, "nuclear" from *Hip Logic* (2002), concludes with a word or syllable made up of at least four letters from the title. The lines wind from "*uncle*" (a clip of vernacular that reminds us of the raw physicality of the repercussions at stake in international disputes) to "race" (the homophone reminding us of the oppressive power disparities behind acts of bullying) to "clean" (as in energy but also as in violent purification). Hayes's linguistic constraint thus hauls unexpected, concrete resonances into a poem that might otherwise read as abstractly "social" or "political." The motivation for the constraint itself, however, remains obscure in Hayes's anagrammatic writing. It may remind us of the productive capacity or "potential" of limitation and constraint, as emphasized by the members of Oulipo and the practitioners of Conceptual Writing. Alternatively, it may bring to mind James Merrill's fond description of the pun as that "most suspect device," that which is orchestrated by and "betrays" not the author's labor but "the hidden wish of words" themselves (111). The use of anagrams, from either of these perspectives, takes us from the specifically poetic tradition of rhyme to a conception of language-as-system, but as a structuring device for an entire poem it reads as somehow undermotivated.

The rule or constraint behind the golden shovel, in contrast, reflects neither the disciplinary word-work of rhyme and meter nor the generalizable wordplay of the anagram. It avoids both of those poles, and Hayes clarifies just how it does so when he describes, in his foreword to the anthology in question, the after-effects of having helped his son *memorize* "We Real Cool." "One night," he explains, "even as I began digging for my own words, *Brooks kept playing in my head*. I decide to string the whole poem down the page and write into it. It was no more than an exercise" (Kahn xxix, emphasis added). The contrasting verbs in Hayes's modest origin story insist on the liminality, even paltriness, of the procedure. In search of his own words, the poet begins by "digging," but finding that grueling work unhelpful, he simply "strings" the words of a predecessor down the page; no need for tough tilling, at least not at the end of the line. Poetic composition, in this situation, does not entail being overtaken by laborious intent or by language itself but by a preexisting short text. It is an act of "writ[ing] into."

There is thus a crucial difference between Hayes's anagram poems and his golden shovels. In "1981" and "1991," the poet strikes his way toward "we," toward "real," toward "cool," not only to provide a string or seam for his own words to follow but in order to deal with the lyric caught "playing" on loop "in [his] head." Notably, despite the success of his new form, Hayes himself has published only one further golden shovel: the poem "Last Train to Africa" written after Elizabeth Alexander's "Ladders" and published in the same collection as his reworking of Brooks (11). The form functions, then, not only as a productive *exercise* but also as an appreciative *exorcism*. It is for Hayes a way of dealing with particularly tenacious short texts; it acknowledges them by moving beyond mere replication.

Furthermore, if anagram poems derive from a generalizable procedure disconnected from any specific predecessor or tradition, golden shovels make such disconnections impossible. They insist on influence. "The work here [in the anthology], like my own poem," Hayes says, "is a way of maintaining, or making material, a link to one of our great poets" (Kahn xxvii). Elsewhere Hayes wonders evocatively, "Who can define 'distant influence'?" (*Float in the Space Between* 15). If the golden shovel cannot answer *that* question, it does seem to define both Brooks and a notion of brief, shareable poems as ongoing close and intermediate influences. Its "making material" is, I will argue, the most vital meaning of both the new form and its attendant anthology. That meaning in turn allows us to revisit Brooks's original text from an angle that reveals its rarely discussed simultaneous engagement with form and a problem of representation.

The anthology itself provides a scale of analysis somewhere between the golden shovel form in the abstract and any individual instantiation of that form. Peter Kahn, one of the anthology's editors, explains that the golden shovel is both a simple way to "honor those who influence us" (xxxvi). More importantly, it is also a "perfect" way "for less accomplished writers to feel like they're on a relatively even 'playing field' with more accomplished writers because it's a new form that doesn't have the intimidating weight of history and the years of practice that come with more traditional forms." This notion of a novel form as democratizing or evening the "playing field" is reiterated when Kahn's refers to the form being "transferable" (to new writers but also to the work of other poets besides Brooks) and to the balance the anthology maintains between pedagogical value and literary accomplishment. It also echoes Hayes's description of the golden shovel as an "exercise." The line of reasoning toward which these echoes point insists on the political potential that comes with the creation of new forms or new institutions. One way to formulate that line of reasoning would be to say that in the golden shovel, traditional poetic features such as rhyme are replaced by homage or influence. Rather than abstractions—linguistic, mathematical, or otherwise—the formal "spine" of each shovel is a specific previous text (or excerpt) written by a specific author, herself coming from and engaging with particular prior traditions (xxvii). This mapping is the act of "making material, a link" that Hayes describes.

Hayes's innovation, we can say, is exemplary of a function that projects precise (quoted) influence directly onto the abstract combinations of poetic form. It maps the social onto the formal. The spots of the poem (the end words) that might generally feature the sonic repetitions of rhyme (or, in Brooks's poem, the exacting repetition of an unstable pronoun) are filled, in Hayes's poem, with a direct link to a predecessor. They are determined, that is, not by sonic similarity ("cool" and "school") or linguistic identity ("We" and "We"), but by a preexisting text written by another author. This is an intimate, incompletely socialized form. By substituting for linguistic attributes—such as rhyme or anagram—a specific "material" link to an influential predecessor, it interprets poetic form itself as an analogy for the small social institution. The side of the poem indexes and visualizes the dispersion of highly formalized pieces of language. It thus corresponds to the sharing of such pieces (quotes, poems, techniques) among readers and writers as well as across different audiences. In this way, Hayes's golden shovel makes material the emergence of form from form, and it offers itself as a "solution" that cannot be understood as purely symbolic: It responds to the apparent dichotomy between the transparent real and technical cool with a kind of translucence that spreads.

A brief discussion of two subsequent instantiations of "the golden shovel" will reinforce that form's robustness, inasmuch as it can take abide experiment and real challenges to its constraints. It will also elaborate on how the form pays homage to Brooks by preserving her words, by highlighting her stylistic tendencies, and by engaging directly with the peril and the promise of circulation.

Douglas Kearney's contribution to the anthology uses a different Brooks poem from *The Bean Eaters*, "Strong Men, Riding Horses," to generate its spine (*Blacks* 329). His, "The Strong Strong Men Riding Strong Strong Horses after the West," announces its approach right in its title. Lived experience is repetitious, multiply mediated, simultaneous, the doublings of "Strong" seem to say from the outset (165-67). The images of masculinity promulgated by the Western, examined more quietly in Brooks's own "Strong Men, Riding Horses," function as traps tied into both colonial violence and constraining stereotypes. Consider the poem's fifth and final stanza or "reel":

> [reel 5]
>
> strong men are reaching-eyed are
> riding a thousand horses in the desert
> west. are riding horses. horses range-eyed
> from the orange miles and miles men, men crying! except
> in the too strong west. the too strong west that
> the strong men are reaching to. from. the strong
> men riding the strong horses, the thousand thousand miles men
> are strong in the strong orange desert strong men in the strong west are.

These lines enact a kind of obliterative or hysterical repetition, whereby the strange pleasure of the distorted syntax and repetitions, which approaches but never gives into inanity, mirrors a collective investment in "too strong" models that continue to constrict lived experience long after one knows they are preposterous ("men crying!"). The "reaching" and the "thousand

thousand miles" are accessible to the strong, but the work of reaching anything outside the reels in which we find ourselves is hard for "Lester after the Western" who, in the manner of Prufrock's meditations on Prince Hamlet, knows "I am not like that" and knows "I am not brave at all" (329). What Kearney's five text-reels add is the sense of mediation and simultaneity that his work often encourages us to contemplate. Here, the small pieces—the phrase, the image, the idea—seem to ride in circles until they fill nearly every frame. In this way, the poem's most compelling phrases, like "reaching-eyed" and "the orange miles," are experienced as dangerous because they are attractive.

Like Kearney, Tyehimba Jess uses Hayes's new form to create an oversaturated textual environment that reflects, and reflects on, the problems of circulation. Jess's poem does not appear in *The Golden Shovel Anthology*; it instead anchors his Pulitzer-Prize winning second book *Olio* (2016), an exuberant and challenging collection of poems, prose, drawings, statistics, and paratexts, many of which focus on nineteenth-century Black cultural figures (with particular attention devoted to under-appreciated nineteenth-century musicians). The book explores a wide range of fonts, layout designs, and genres, including the meta-genre of the miscellany, and its centerpiece takes that abundance to extremes in its form and its formatting. But Jess's "The Dunbar-Booker Golden Shovel" also explores, and intentionally exaggerates, the promise held open by cultural circulation: the seeding of new possibilities. That doubleness is built-in to Jess's expansion of Hayes's form as his own poem is a "double shovel," with the first thirty-two words from Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask," from *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896), serving as the end words of its lines. "Dunbar-Booker" in fact takes the material form of a perforated foldout spanning two pages—which makes it somewhat difficult to describe and requires readers to turn the book on its side, or remove the foldout entirely, in order to engage with its lines.

Even after a quick spatial reorientation, we are still left with a question as to whether the main text, which fills an entire "double" page (implicitly page 143, by *Olio*'s logic), is to be treated as a pair of sixteen-line columns or as a single sixteen-line poem with long lines separated by a small caesura-like space in the middle. Are we to read "This be our slick survival guile: / bestudded with built-in automatic smiles" or "This be our slick survival guile / shinin' white folks on like spit-polished shoes. We got our lies bestudded with built-in automatic smiles" (Jess 143)? Is the sentiment or argument different in any fixed way? As critic John Beer has noted, the voice in what seems to be the Booker half of the double shovel is "often not quite distinguishable" from that of the Dunbar portion (and that indistinction, in turn, distinguishes Jess's exploration of masks from, for example, Pound's use of personae). The "brief for uplifted pride" and the ironized "masquerade" come disarmingly close to each other (Beer 120).

If any interpretive desire to cleanly disarticulate the poem's different "masks" seems fraught, the relevance of that worry itself is called into question by the pair of tables on the reverse of the oversized page. "Table 2-3" lists the number of "Black Victims of Lynching by state from 1882-1930" whereas "Table 2-4" arrays the "Reasons Given for Black Lynchings" (144). It is difficult to say whether the typographically small numbers and the "hideously ludicrous rationales" are better able to represent the scale of the violence they point to than the poem on their reverse, but thus contextualized the lines of the poem come to seem both burdened with significance and ludicrously paltry in comparison to that burden (Beer 120). Likewise, the tone of the extended note to this poem at the back of *Olio* seems both outrageously dissociated from the brutal facts of the tables and to share something, even if just a sliver of glibness, with the casually dehumanizing language of the "Reasons Given."

That note also forces us to realize we have been thinking far too dichotomously. "Create your own path through their side-by-side," it tells us in the voice of a genial huckster committed to geometric liberation. "[S]tart anywhere, and read them line-by-line, backward, forward, and diagonal-wise" (Jess 213). We are further encouraged to "liberate" the lines by "cut[ting] them loose along the dotted lines" (214) and to create, from this freed oversized page, a variety of cylinders, a torus, a Möbius strip. Beer points out, "In this work dedicated to the excavation of African-American popular culture before the advent of recording, the resemblance to a piano roll, or Edisonian cylinder, is likely no coincidence" (120-21). Thus, Jess's golden shovel reveals itself to be engaged, from top to bottom and from text to paratext, with many of the issues foregrounded by Kearney's. Questions of genre, media technology, simultaneity, vernacular, and voice are right on the surface, even as we are literally shifting that surface in our hands. In that welter, the circulation of cultural forms (masks, stereotypes, "automatic" affects, the "slurring out of our sadness into song") is put into complex relation with the circulation of ideologies and technologies of white violence.

The content and the formal strategies of Jess's poem are more overtly expansive than those of Kearney, but the emphasis on the catchiness of "the stereotype" (whether as visual image or "mask") that Tiffany describes in *My Silver Planet* is central to both (13, 50). And though at an even greater remove, Brooks and her most famous poem are still present in Jess's complicated, tactile text. Dunbar's sixteen-line ballad makes up its twin spine, but the "opening" line nods to Brooks's original poem as the source of the form by ending with the first-person plural pronoun, capitalized: "We dance it out daily. We" (142). And if the optimism in the awkward gesture of removing and folding Jess's golden shovel seems cut through with complicity and almost obscenely naïve—as if the page were a frail paper airplane meant to be tossed into the future—the circuits flown by Brooks's own poem are a reminder that even twentieth and twenty-first century poems have afterlives that cannot but be collective.

CHAPTER 3

Made Possible By: Aram Saroyan and the Demands of Minimalism

1. A Further Reduction

Inching both forward and backward in time—from the 1959 of "We Real Cool" and the 2017 of the anthology originating out of it, respectively—this chapter examines a third very short American poem: Aram Saroyan's "lighght," first published in 1966 and back in readily available print as of 2007. A single, seven-character lexeme constitutes the entirety of the text, making it the shortest of the works my project addresses. When printed toward the middle of a slim, seventy-page book published by Random House in 1968, the poem appeared somewhat faint, as if diminished by way of comparison with the size of the page (see Fig. 13).[127]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Saroyan's exceedingly small and technically untitled one-"word" poem has not been canonized to the extent that Pound's and Brooks's most successful short works have been. Despite its visual gentleness, it frequently strikes readers as unforthcoming and has generated strong aversive reactions. In its extreme brevity, after all, "lighght" approaches close enough to the zero-limit described in my introductory chapter—Philip Fisher's aesthetic asymptote, Craig Dworkin's bevy of blank works, Susan Sontag's "point of final simplification"—as to suggest an unworkedness and a withdrawal from expected poetic skills that to certain audiences reads as thoroughly asocial. In what follows, however, I argue that both the poem's meaning and its success as an object of attention derive from the tenuous complexity, rather than the obviousness or simplicity, of what it says about artistic production.

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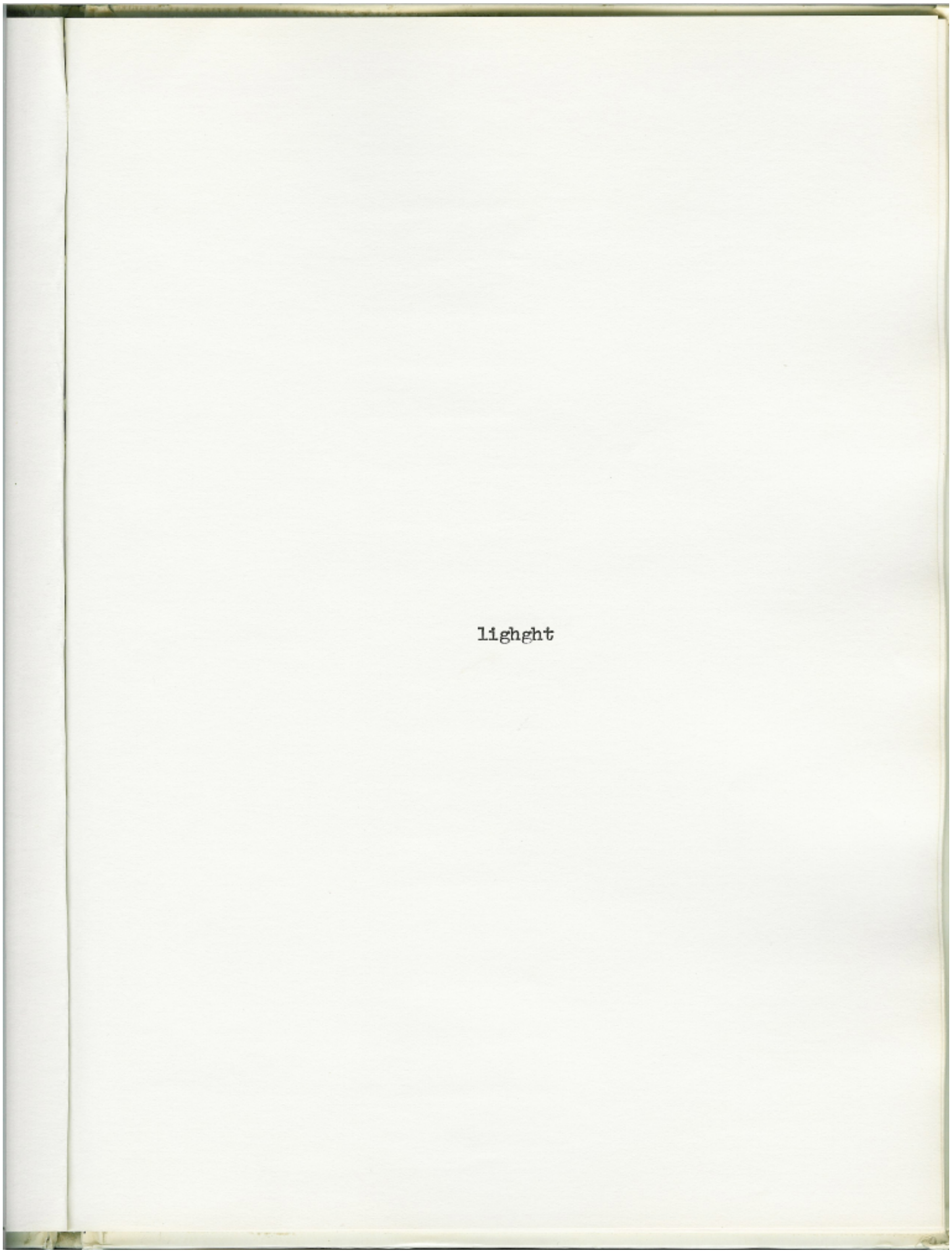
[127] All scans from Saroyan's original publications are courtesy of the online archive Eclipse, edited by Craig Dworkin and Danny Snelson.



lighght

Fig. 13. “lighght,” *Aram Saroyan*, 1968.

More specifically, I understand Saroyan's minimalist intervention in postwar American poetics and the afterlife of his most publicized poem together to constitute a generous acknowledgement of and demand for "support." That demand is activated by the way Saroyan's particular approach to literary minimalism draws attention to the thinness of the distinction between artistic or poetic labor, on the one hand, and intellectual labor or knowledge-work in general, on the other.

First, however, a quick chronology will be helpful, because Saroyan's career is not nearly as well-known as either Pound's or Brooks's. Saroyan's father, William, was a writer himself and for a span between the 1930s and 1960s was nearly as famous as Ernest Hemingway. The son of Armenian immigrants, William grew up in Fresno, California, began publishing stories in 1928, and had a breakthrough in 1934, at the nadir of the Great Depression, with "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze," which turned him into an "overnight sensation" (Saroyan, *Last Rites* 19). His son, Aram, was born in New York City in 1943, grew up aware of his father's renown, and by the early 1960s was editing the small magazine *Lines* (1964-65), appearing in *Poetry* (1964), and interacting with members of the literary and visual avant-gardes, including Louis Zukofsky, Vito Acconci, Ted Berrigan, Clark Coolidge, and Tom Clark.

Regarding "lighght" itself, Saroyan recalls typing the piece initially in 1965. It was "first published as a 24 in. × 36 in. silk screen by Brice Marden in early 1966," where it was printed in yellow against a white background "as if to suggest sunlight" (Stephens 200).[128] Like both "In a Station of the Metro" and "We Real Cool," "lighght" first circulated in standard print by means of a Chicago-based periodical, when it was included in the September 1967 "concretism" issue of the *Chicago Review*, edited by Robert Duncan. Around the same time, the poem was included in a government-funded project, *The American Literary Anthology / 2* (1969), which generated a long-running controversy that I will describe later in this chapter, as well as in at least two books issued under Saroyan's name: the self-published *Works* (1966), where like all twenty-four of that collection's poems it appears in red ink, and *Aram Saroyan* (1968), which was issued by Random House. The latter collection, clocking in at thirty-one pages, was read in the year of its publication "cover-to-cover, on the local six o'clock NBC News, by [anchor] Edwin Newman, wearing his cultural commentator hat," reportedly as a somewhat mystified critique (Saroyan, *Starting Out* 3). Saroyan's work from that era was returned to wide availability forty years later, in 2007, when Ugly Duckling Presse (UDP) issued *Complete Minimal Poems* (hereafter CMP) as part of its Lost Literature Series. After that edition was awarded the 2008 William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America (for a book of poetry published by a small press, non-profit, or university press), it was reissued in a second edition by UDP and Primary Information in 2013 with a new preface from the award's judge, Ron Silliman.

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[128] Stephens reproduces Marden's silkscreen in his sharp discussion of Saroyan in the context of "the one-word poem," which Stephens refers to as a "form" and a "rubric" rather than a genre (190, 207, 200).

In the wake of the reissuing of his early work, Saroyan has received renewed critical attention. Journalists, scholars, and poets have hinted at the suitability of his visual aesthetic to our current era of ubiquitous screens; mocked the bewildered responses of politicians to his work; emphasized the cognitive fecundity of his poetry in the minds of even its most vehement critics; and acknowledged the influence of his minimal poems on "several of the directions that American poetry would take in their wake" (Silliman 7).[129] In contrast to those forward-leaning approaches, I want to consider instead how Saroyan's work positions itself with respect to its immediate predecessors and contemporaries, in the mid and late 1960s. His best-known and most acutely minimal poems—such as "lighght" and "eyeye"—are very much of a piece with the rest of his work from the same era, and they respond in compelling ways to the milieu in which they were written as well as to a broader discourse of public “support” for cultural endeavors, which was itself given specific institutional form with the founding of the National Endowment of the Arts in late 1965 (CMP 31, 30).

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[129] See Dworkin, "The Imaginary Solution" 30; Daly, "You Call That Poetry?!"; and Luck, "'Lighght' Reading."

One goal of this approach is to make possible a reconsideration of the exceedingly public controversies Saroyan’s work generated on the floor of the U. S. House of Representatives in the 1970s and on the floor of the U. S. Senate in the 1990s in the context of broader questions that minimalism raises about artistic labor. The pressure that Saroyan’s extreme but gentle “intentional reduction” placed on the question of where the “work” in an artwork lies helped foster both the circulation of his tiny poem and the public debates it initiated, which involved Representatives such as William Scherle and John Brademas and Senators such as Jesse Helms, John Ashcroft, Barbara Boxer, and Tom Harkin (Perloff, “Minimalism” 886). In contextualizing Saroyan’s style in terms of postwar literary history and then examining those public debates, as recorded in the Congressional Record, I will be concerned to emphasize the ways in which “lighght,” by performing weakness and error, controverts the most forceful rebukes of minimalism in our critical literature. Those accounts derive from claims that the art historian and critic Michael Fried was beginning to articulate in the same mid-1960s moment that found Saroyan producing his most enduring experiments in brevity. In particular, Saroyan’s minimalist poems commit not to swindling the American taxpayer (as Scherle and Ashcroft would have it) or to extorting co-creative participation from their readers (as literary critics working from Fried’s line of thought would have it) but to exploring the thin and shifting boundaries that distinguish, or fail to distinguish, poetic labor from intellectual labor more generally in a particular moment. Whatever the diverse reactions of the various readers of “lighght,” the poem itself, like much of Saroyan’s early work, repositions a broader tendency in postwar American poetry by insisting on its proximate relation to historically and technologically conditioned notions of production and productivity.

2. Midcentury Modernist Poetics

Saroyan is forthright about the influence of 1960s sculptural minimalism, and the work of Donald Judd in particular, on his writing practice. By way of that movement and the model of Ted Berrigan, he was necessarily also indebted to the original avant-garde of the early twentieth century, and he frequently describes his handful of found poems, which are composed of headlines and short excerpts lifted directly from newspapers, as "readymades," in homage to Marcel Duchamp's "unassisted" works of the 1910s.[130] Yet to recognize Saroyan's experiments in hyperbolic brevity as more than a straightforward application to literature of the conceptual and visual instantaneity he relished in the arts, and as far more than a series of anti-poetry or anti-art gestures, we can situate his minimal poems in relation to the field of midcentury American poetry more generally.

Whereas totalizing debates about post-WWII visual art have been appearing continuously since at least the mid-1960s, something like a distinct and relatively coherent "postwar period" in American poetry is only now coming into view. That periodization is most apparent in the recent publication of *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 194*5 (2013), the first volume of its kind. Its editor, Jennifer Ashton, positions her conclusion to the volume, "Poetry of the Twenty-First Century: The First Decade," as marking an endpoint to the domain set out in the companion's title. Ashton argues for viewing "*the entire post-1945 era of American poetic*

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[130] See, for instance, Saroyan, "My Sixties" 29.

production as an era distinctively committed to building a literary art around the value of self-expression" (216, emphasis added). Moreover, she conjectures that certain examples of "First-Decade poetry," by way of their distinct commitments to "forms of scarcity," reveal that "we may well have arrived at a crucial dialectical shift in the social and aesthetic history of poetry: a new modernism, post-postmodernism" (216, 227, 228). I will return to what I take to be the core of Ashton's argument at the end of this chapter, but for the moment I want simply to underscore how her note of synthesis (however sharply critical) is one sounded by a range of contemporary critics. Oren Izenberg describes how earlier surveys organized the field around a fissure:

> I offer a challenge and an alternative to a nearly unanimous literary-historical consensus that would divide poetry into two warring camps—post-Romantic and postmodern; symbolist and constructivist; traditionalist and avant-garde—camps that would pit form against form on grounds at once aesthetic and ethical. Rather than choosing sides in this conflict or re-sorting the poems upon its field of battle … (*Being Numerous* 1)

In line with this refusal of sortings and "re-sorting[s]," Jahan Ramazani in *Poetry and Its Others* (2014) and Christopher Nealon in *The Matter of Capital* (2016) likewise aim to redescribe postwar American poetry in ways that avoid what now looks like an unhelpfully reductive "two warring camps" approach, albeit to quite different effects. Ramazani pursues a macro-generic definition of twentieth-century English-language poetry, which he dedicates to *both* of the two critics most often associated with the two opposing "sides": "For / Helen Vendler / and / Marjorie Perloff" (xii). Nealon, meanwhile, attempts to rescue the demonstrably extensive attention dedicated to economic issues in the writings of twentieth- and early twenty-first century poets from the relative disinterest in those issues expressed by those poets' strongest interpreters (Perloff and Charles Altieri, in Nealon's account). More specifically (and at the risk of reaffirming the fissure Izenberg recounts), Nealon argues that Pound (1884-1972) and W. H. Auden (1907-1973), though separated by a generation and thus not precise contemporaries, are the two defining poles for poets writing after 1945; their shared (if divergent) interest in "the matter of capital" serves to ground the poet-critic's conception of the field.

These syntheses—whether totalizing as in Ashton or partial as in Nealon—are all attempts to come to terms with what happens to poetry *after modernism*. The simplest thing to be said with respect to that conundrum is so simple that it is too rarely stated baldly: *Postwar American poetry is thoroughly ambivalent about its immediate predecessors*. It is "on both sides" with respect to their value. In the "choosing sides" discussions, this fact takes the form of nominating particular ancestors rather than others: Wallace Stevens rather than Pound, Williams and Moore rather than Eliot, and so on. In the more recent synthetic histories, the truth of post-45 ambivalence with respect to high modernism is so thoroughly implied that it receives relatively little direct attention. To defamiliarize that truth, we need only contrast it with the positions staked out by the high modernists themselves. The most influential American poets who matured before World War II notoriously spurned their historically proximate predecessors (in a manner not wholly dissimilar from the Romantic critique of Neoclassical poetics). Pound, for one, dismissed swaths of Victorian and Romantic poetry and looked back, instead, to the Troubadours and the Ancients—to the extent that his occasional acknowledgments of the value of a Whitman or a Swinburne are noteworthy as exceptions to the broader pattern of condemnation. In contrast, it seems clear that the vast majority of compelling post-45 American poets found their way by both accepting and pushing back against the mixed lessons of their own immediate forerunners, most especially Pound and his peers. The refusal of such writers to completely rebuke those lessons, however disparately construed and however institutionally determined, is the characteristic that most convincingly unifies postwar American poetry as a field.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the work of Gwendolyn Brooks, whose debut book appeared in 1945, speaks directly to that ambivalence, perhaps most especially in the intricate verbal tensions it explores as a means of balancing modernist commitments against a concern with circulation. As a means of shifting from the midcentury moment proper to the 1960s and 1970s of Saroyan and his peers, I want to consider one further figure at greater length: Robert Lowell, a poet born in the same year as Brooks (1917), one whose style shifted as dramatically as Brooks's did over the decades, and one who bore the brunt of telling critiques from Saroyan's more immediate predecessors and peers. Alongside Allen Ginsberg, Lowell was the most public poet of his time, and like both Ginsberg and (in the next generation) Saroyan himself, Lowell had contentious interactions with political authorities. But within the sphere of American poetics he came to represent precisely the seriousness, erudition, virtuosity, and (most especially) exertion that Saroyan's minimalism seems to oppose.

At the end of his introduction to Lowell's *Collected Poems* (2003), Frank Bidart cites a striking (and to that point unpublished) letter Lowell sent to his friend and fellow poet Elizabeth Bishop in July 1959 (xvi): "In the hospital I spent a mad month or more rewriting *everything* in my three books. I arranged the poems chronologically, starting with the Greek and Roman times and finally rose to air and the present with *Life Studies*. I felt that I had hit the skies, that all cohered. I[t] was mostly waste" (xvi). This recollection, although it describes a failure pure enough to have left no further archival trace, gets to the heart of Lowell's practice. The myth of that practice has been codified in a quip attributed to Randall Jarrell that Lowell included in one of the sonnets in his 1973 collection *History* and which Bidart places front and center in his preface: “You didn’t write. You *re*wrote….” (532). That elliptical mantra of craftsmanship, in which the work is never complete, is taken to its exhausting extreme in Lowell’s vision of a glorious and total rewrite—“rewriting *everything*”—that leads to the kind of harmony associated with “air” and “skies.” Lowell’s Puritan heritage and the notion of good, hard work as sign (though not cause) of salvation undergird his account of “mad” and mostly fruitless labor.

The poems on the very next pages of *Collected* are those that opened *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946) and launched Lowell’s career. They reveal just how consistently the author thematized and valorized strenuous work. The epigraph to Lowell’s 1946 collection reads, “It’s Lambkin was a mason good / As ever built wi’ stane: / He built Lord Wearie’s castle / But payment gat he nane…” (5). In the old ballad Lowell is quoting, the mason Lambkin subsequently slaughters his Lord’s wife and children. His uncompensated “good” work and the violence it leads to hang like specters over the book’s more overt engagements with war and religion. Lowell’s world, meanwhile, is populated by oxen (10), “jack-hammer jabs” (11), plough-horses (22), and the “longshoreman Charon” (23), and it is one that never misses a chance to evoke how “Our fathers wrung their bread from stocks and stones” (31). Throughout, the fierce consonants—“rusty mire” (9), “A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket” (14)—and heavily stressed lines—“Scarlet or green, before their black-tongued Sire” (39)—formalize these concerns as an ongoing struggle against the rocky and oceanic matter of language.

In the worldview Lowell’s book takes up, “good work” is placed in direct tension with salvation, and the possibility that we will not be compensated for our efforts is simply one possible theological endpoint: “God / Abandoned us to Satan, and he pressed / Us hard, until we thought we could not rest / Till we had done with life. Content was gone. / All the good work was quashed. We were undone" (61-62). This anxiety, that the work cannot save us and that it may turn, abruptly, into "mostly waste," generates much of the fervor of Lowell's writing. The collection's opening piece, "Exile's Return," describes a liberated German town in the aftermath of the war. A citizen is returning to his reconstituted home, and the poem concludes by welcoming him: "Pleasant enough, / *Voi ch'entrate*, and your life is in your hands" (9). The irony built into the severed Dante borrowing, which lops "Abandon all hope" off of "You who enter here," captures precisely the possibility that all will be for naught. But in the meantime, your life is what you make it.

"[Your] life is in your hands": That capsule statement of self-sufficiency, however ironized, is a legacy version of the modernist work ethic. That ethic is most familiar, as we saw in Chapter 1, in the anecdotes of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound rewriting *The Waste Land*; of Pound himself gradually carving "In a Station of the Metro" out of a much longer text; or of Ernest Hemingway producing thirty-nine, or forty-seven, drafts of the final page of *A Farewell to Arms*. In those instances, the labor of writing and revising (frequently fetishized and masculinized) is positioned as a guarantee not of value itself—hard work can and frequently does produce "waste"—but of the reality and trustworthiness of the value of those things that are already being treated as valuable. In other words, stories about and signifiers of "work done" serve to retrospectively underwrite the value already attributed to the results of that work.

The continuing force, into and beyond the 1940s, of the Calvinist creed that salvation cannot be "earned" through good works *and* that no singular sign of grace is sufficient makes it impossible for Lowell to rest on his accumulating laurels. In 1946, he is proclaiming, "your life is in your hands"; in the late 1950s, along the way from the magazine incarnations of some of the poetry to be found in *Life Studies* (1959) to Faber and Faber's edition of the book to Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy's second and definitive edition, he is heatedly revising over a quarter of the poems and crafting the long biographical prose piece ("91 Revere Street"); in mid-1959, he is furiously "rewriting *everything*"; in 1967, he is publishing *Near the Ocean*, a physically oversized collection that one reviewer, while calling special attention to the scads of revisions between the magazine and monograph versions of the poems, will note "'looks unmistakably like a 'big production'"; and in 1973, he is publishing *History*, a book-length revision of *Notebook* (1970), itself a revised and expanded edition of *Notebook 1967-68* (Carruth 58). Along the way, Lowell comes to symbolize big books, big stakes, and big effort.

Despite Lowell's own sense in 1960 that he was "hanging" in the balance between the "raw" and the "cooked" poetries of the time, his bigness made him something of a punching bag for more overtly antiestablishment poets in the decades after WWII ("Acceptance Speech" n.p.). David Antin prefaces one of his discursive "talk poems" by quoting himself saying, "if robert lowell is a / poet i dont want to be a poet   if robert frost was a / poet i dont want to be a poet if socrates was a poet / i'll consider it" (1). Antin's characteristically casual notation and staccato pacing distinguish the insult from the workmanlike poems of Lowell and the very different workmanlike poems of Frost. A few years earlier, while reviewing Lowell's *Near the Ocean*, Hayden Carruth, despite his best efforts to attend to the "these strange new poems" themselves, finds it almost impossible to avoid a kind of seething and ubiquitous "envy" that Lowell fosters "among literary people," a feeling exacerbated by the fact that Lowell would publish a book so obviously intended "to catapult the poet into the cushiest seat in stardom; as if he weren't sitting there already" (58-59). According to Carruth, "the reasons for this envy are obvious enough": Lowell's conspicuous advantages of "birth," "talent and intelligence," and "success" (60). It is less those advantages themselves that irk Carruth, though, than that they are on display. He longs for the 1950s when Lowell's books were known for their "reasonable appearance," "quiet formats," and "modest crosshatch illustrations by Frances Parker" (58).

The clearest antipode to Lowell's particular kind of practice may be a now well-known anecdote about a joint reading given by Lowell and Frank O'Hara on February 9, 1962. The younger poet introduced "Lana Turner," a piece he claimed to have tossed off that day on the Staten Island Ferry while heading to the event (after purchasing a copy of the day's *New York Post* featuring an article about the star's "collapse"): "O'Hara read the poem that afternoon, making it clear that he had written it in transit. The audience loved it; Lowell looked put out" (Lehman 349). Crucially, in David Lehman's account, O'Hara took the reading quite seriously: he viewed it as "something of a grudge match" and he quotes Bill Berkson recollecting it as "a 'mano/mano' duel." Thus framed, the description of O'Hara's mid-career poetry (c. 1956) as "his 'I do this I do that' poems" serves as a wry and intentional foil to "You didn't write. You *re*wrote…." (Lehman 168). If the syntax of that descriptor also prefigures Allen Ginsberg's compositional mantra of "first thought, best thought," O'Hara's pronoun-anchored formulation clarifies what we already know: his poems strike their pose of breeziness more knowingly or winkingly than Ginsberg's do. More significantly, that pose of urban naturalism is meant in part to combat Lowell's midcentury incarnation of the Poundian work ethic (discussed in Chapter 1). It situates O'Hara's "Personism" (1959) as a direct counter to Confessional Poetry and, more partially and distantly, as a reply to Pound's *Personae*-ism.[131]

The moment in the early 1960s when both Lowell and Ginsberg were at the height of their fame is frequently understood to be the last one in which poetry played a substantial role in the public sphere in the United States. And Ginsberg's mantra—like Antin's jibe and O'Hara's anecdote of ease—contrasts cleanly with Lowell's obsessive revisionism (366). Yet Ginsberg and Lowell's own notoriously joint reading, at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in New York in 1977, both affirms and complicates the contrast between "mainstream" Confessionalism and the avant-gardes. At that event, Gregory Corso "heckle[s]" the Boston poet relentlessly enough that Lowell rebukes Corso, the audience claps (in support of Lowell), and Ginsberg eventually intervenes on Lowell's behalf (after additional outbursts from Corso) sealing something of an "amiable truce" between purportedly warring camps (Hamilton 460).

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[131] On these aspects of O'Hara's poetics, see Shaw 5-16, 62-80.

Corso's disaffection is with Lowell's style of presentation. The older poet's mythological allusions and self-explications sound to Corso's ears far too loyal to academia and an earlier, harder modernist poetics. Indeed, Lowell's work-ethical compulsions would seem to place his indebtedness to learning and modernism at a far remove from the opposition to polish and institutionalized knowledge-production that Corso expresses, both during Lowell's reading and in his own poetry. Yet if Lowell's introductions to and commentary on his poems carry the tone of the seminar room, they are also profoundly anti-oracular. They take the form of a series of *self*-interruptions that are, when we revisit the extant recording of the event, far more distracting than Corso's complaints. Lowell's hesitations and interruptions serve as a reminder that in addition to sheer effortfulness, his poetry is, as Izenberg identifies, profoundly "skeptical of modernism's totalizing forms of artistic mastery."[132] Lowell was, after all, amenable to publishing multiple drafts or versions of poems. Those efforts undoubtedly serve as signs of his ceaseless rewriting, but they also reflect a division. If Weber highlights the Calvinist emphasis on "restless and successful labor in [one's] calling," Lowell's drafts divorce "restless" from the determination of "success." In the rewriting and republishing everywhere on evidence across his bulky *Collected Poems*, Lowell courts and eschews his own virtuosity. Publishing four versions of the "same" poem, in seeming to undermine its autonomy, can be interpreted as progressive or "open" to the extent that such a decision—like Brooks's uncomfortably overlong and obtrusively ultrashort lines—refuses to perform "formal mastery" clearly or unmistakably.

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[132] Even as he declares that his own project has strategically *not* taken the "course" of reconciling Confessional poets with their more outwardly radical contemporaries, Izenberg observes, "Postmodernists like Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath are, in their turn, skeptical of modernism's totalizing forms of artistic mastery; newly receptive, too, to the human particularity and social situatedness of the poetic speaker" (*Being Numerous* 5).

3. Three Approaches to an Exemplary Error

Saroyan's minimalism develops in the mid-1960s moment that falls between the pair of paired readings I have just glossed—Lowell and O'Hara in 1962, Lowell and Ginsberg in 1977. His poems clearly embrace the critique of excessive, Lowellian effortfulness articulated by members of the East and West coast avant-gardes. Significantly, however, they formalize that critique by tightening their focus upon the resistance to formal mastery pursued by even the slightly earlier postwar poets more overtly oriented toward technical accomplishment, including Lowell and Brooks. They thus isolate that resistance as one of the major expressions of midcentury American poetry's ambivalent relationship to high modernism, and they do so by deploying a "technics of error"—think of the extra "gh" in "lighght"—that situates literary production in unusually proximate relation to writerly or intellectual labor in general.

Before directing attention toward Saroyan's particular use of error, I want to look briefly at a passage from one additional author in order to specify what that term means in the context of poems that are responsible for their own forms. The poetry of John Ashbery is widely taken to be "extremely difficult, if not often impenetrable," and that difficulty resides in part in his writing's exemplary negotiations between mastery and mistake (Kostelanetz 5). In confronting those negotiations, we seem to be asked, as readers, to sacrifice something. As Ashbery has it in "The

New Spirit" from *Three Poems* (1972), "The wind is now fresh and full, with leaves and other things flying. And to release it from its condition of hardness you will have to take apart the notion of you" (19). The text's hazy logic stipulates a condition of undoing that "you" must fulfill in order to undo, in turn, the floating "condition of hardness" of the thing-full "wind." The addressee, in other words, bears the responsibility for their own self-dissolution, which is one prerequisite for "release[ing]" the new spirit of Ashbery's title. It is only by way of straying or dissolving that the recipient can organize, or join in, the amused grace of the windy poem itself.

In that process, as we make our way as readers through (or alongside) Ashbery's easy way with difficulty or "hardness," we may take solace in the fact that the poem's sentences, at least, behave properly a good deal of the time, even when we are less than completely clear as to what they might be articulating. The grammar, that is, seems to obey agreed upon norms—except when we suddenly bump into what appears to be an obvious error. Consider this passage from a few pages earlier in "The New Spirit":

> Because life is short
> We must remember to keep asking it the same question
> Until the repeated question and the same silence become answer
> In words broken open and pressed to the mouth
> And the last silence reveal the lining
> Until at last this thing exist separately (7)

In the final two lines we expect to encounter singular verbs. We expect "silence reveals the lining" and "this thing exists separately." The absence of *s*-endings is strange here, and there is a lot we could do as critics with the disruptively plural verbs on the page. We could backtrack and try to parse Ashbery's phrasing in a more complex way, a way that would give us grammatically plural subjects, perhaps by making "words broken open" the agent of "reveal." Or we could argue that the poem presents both "silence" and "this thing" themselves as somehow multiple, perhaps in a manner expressed in their actions or actual "exist[ence]," even though not in the nouns we use to designate them. I appreciate those options and would not wish to forestall them, but we overlook something if we ignore the sense of error that is the initial result of encountering the strange grammar in the last lines of the passage just quoted. You are reading along and doing your best to track the text's successive abstractions, and when you hit those lines you worry, "Hang on, I must have missed something." Or your reaction is, "The publisher let in a typo!" Or you think, "Perhaps Ashbery slipped up or simply didn't care, or perhaps he's up to something…" I risk generalizing a universal reader here, but the basic point is simple: The idea of work imperfectly done is important for thinking about a surprising number of strains of postwar American poetry. These moments of willful less-than-competence are ways of (partly) slipping the demands of the modernist work ethic. Even in the work of an author widely regarded as the most influential and most virtuosic poet of his generation, eschewals of mastery reveal themselves as fundamental.[133] Small, intentional glitches of grammar and "broken" fabrication—including, for example, the brief episode of lineal fragmentation with which "The New Spirit" in fact begins—contend with the otherwise calm unfolding of Ashbery's lines.

In a sense, Saroyan's career begins with an identical moment:

a man stands
on his
head one
minute--

then he
sit
down all
different

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[133] Helen Vendler, for example, describes Ashbery's "style" as "so influential that its imitators are legion" ("Understanding Ashbery" 108). Of the poet's expansive virtuosity, Langdon Hammer writes, "no American poet has had a larger, more diverse vocabulary, not Whitman, not Pound" (n.p.).

This two-quatrain poem centers on the subject-verb misalignment in its sixth line. It is also, Saroyan notes wryly, the entirety of "[t]he longest poem, the first" in the first book of his put out by a "mainstream publisher" (*Starting Out in the Sixties* 4). Forty years later, it reappears as the first entry in *Complete Minimal Poems*. Saroyan's tiny oeuvre thus opens with a grammatical hiccup—"he / sit"—that is on its surface quite similar to those I have highlighted in Ashbery. Yet in the context of Ashbery's long poems, long lines, and flowing paragraphs, even provocative errors exist only as pinpricks within far grander wholes, which are themselves thematized through repeated invocations of enormity: "[t]he whole structure," "the whole thing," "There must be nothing," "the Juggernaut," "with everything sorted and labeled" (*Three Poems* 18-19). The Ashberian situation, then, is one of "everything" or "nothing," a fact often discussed by critics in terms of the poet's penchant for the pronouns "all," "everything," and "it." Crucially, these gestures toward holism occur in relation to the (likewise much commented upon) toying with pronouns of address ("you" and "I") that we find in his poems. The effect of that combination is to suggest a subject *experiencing a gigantic whole from within*, which somewhat unexpectedly links Ashbery's poetry to Lowell's. The two authors are tonally as distinct as can be, with Ashbery's holism manifesting as gently ironized and far less solemn than the work-ethical severity of Lowell's. Yet both the former's flow and the latter's publishing of multiple versions can be understood as commitments to "open" form that allow their authors to explore "everything" in terms of subjective experience.[134]

Attitudinally, Saroyan aligns with Ashbery against Lowell; formally, however, he aligns against both in a commitment to closed form. Each of his minimal poems is isolated in the center of a blank page, and that layout generates a sense of visual integrity. That integrity or closure is of course not, as we have seen, a question of "polish." Saroyan in fact foregrounds a technics of error by deploying it in poems brief enough that a single provocative glitch can seem to loom over the entire text. A substantial proportion of Saroyan's poems—such as "morni,ng" and "Blod"—enact this approach. Even in the eight-line poem "a man stands," the grammatical mishap is far clearer than it is in a long prose poem like "The New Spirit." We might hesitate momentarily at "he / sit," but both the poem's brevity and its prominence (on the page and in the book) quickly dissipate whatever small doubts arise as to its intentionality. Moreover, any effort to backtrack or rework the syntax of the poem is belied by its ostentatious simplicity.

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[134] Ashbery was forthright about his particular disinterest in Lowell's seriousness: "the new poets who began publishing after the war, like Robert Lowell, were very serious and depressing, and not, to me anyway, verbally engaging" (*John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford* 32).

"a man stands" is thus representative, but it also occupies a central place in Saroyan's body of work because its unrepresentative length allows it to frame the rest of *Complete Minimal Poems*. Part of that framing is the way in which the poem initially presents as an example of relatively straightforward mimesis. Its verbal miscue enacts the physiological distortion its micro-narrative purports to describe. The short time the man spends on his head alters his perspective, and the inadequacy of standard linguistic structures in the face of representing that (minimal) experience necessitates a small grammatical anomaly.

The near-transparency of this *experiential interpretation* of "a man stands" is underwhelming. It turns the poem into a mild joke or gimmick about the character's subjective perceptual experience. In the previous chapter, I argued that Brooks's "We Real Cool" enacts a gimmicky catchiness in part to register a situation of infrastructural inequity. In Saroyan's far briefer poems, the gimmick is more pervasive in that even its meaning seems decidedly small or unimportant. Ngai's *Theory of the Gimmick* is again useful in this different context. The "manufactured, contrived, or gimmicky artwork" is, for Ngai, one that offers itself in the form of illicit or unwanted “transparency” inasmuch as it “confronts us with an artifact that would seem to undermine rather than enhance its aesthetic power by drawing attention to its process of coming into being” (83-84). This theorization refreshes a range of concepts from discussions of the avant-garde—concepts that privilege a text’s insistence on its own devices (artifice, materiality)—by emphasizing their shticky humor. The way the work-as-gimmick makes the means of aesthetic production hyper-visible is the source and meaning of the distaste we feel when encountering it. Ngai’s definition accords well with common reactions to Saroyan’s technics of error. Unlike Ashbery’s grammatical mishaps—which reflexively comment on or predict the confused reader’s experience of his poem and thus generate an intimacy that draws us in (and back)—Saroyan’s “typos” disappoint or repel because we see too much of the making.

At the same time, we see too little of the experience (of the man) that the making purports to represent. Framing “a man stands” as a gimmick, that is, highlights the irony of the final lines. The change expressed by “all / different” refers to how the man’s perception has altered, but that “difference” remains undescribed. That absence, in turn, underscores the subjectivity of any such experience and the fact that the overall situation itself remains unchanged. Whatever difference intrudes, the man is still identified by the masculine pronoun and the overall situation is stable: Whether it is beneath the top of his head or the bottom of his bottom, the ground remains the same. The (visual) similarity of the two stanzas reflects the unchangingness of the overall situation.

An understanding of the very short poem as simultaneously closed-off or unchanging and all-too visible or gimmicky accords with Saroyan’s description of his practice in the mid-1960s:

> I began as a “regular” poet, imitating effects I liked in Creeley, Ashbery, everybody.

> Then one night by accident I typed eyeye. I didn't know what it was. Someone else saw it and said—*yes!* That was about two years ago. For a year after that I did plenty of visual poems. But differently than the concrete poets. … In a visual poem an "imitation" of the shape of an object outside the poem, let's say like the horizon of Holland (to use Finlay), well that's the same type of describing, really, as an old linear poem does. In a good visual poem there are no horizons, fields, kisses, hugs, sentiments etc. but those implicitly inside the shape of the word constellation, which never never never should refer outside—to anything outside it. After all they've been doing shaped poems for centuries. That's entirely old—ruinously old. (Solt 57)

This statement published in 1968 falls into the same genre as Coleridge's account of sleep-writing "Kubla Khan," Pound's of cutting down "Metro," and Brooks's of serrating "Cool." Saroyan rapidly articulates a number of strong positions, but the most emphatic of those is the distinction he marks between a "concrete poem" and "a good visual poem." The former imitates "an object outside the poem"; the latter remains internal. With respect to "a man stands," this emphasis on poetic autonomy promotes a second, *tightly reflexive interpretation*. In this reading, the opening phrase "a man" is just that, a pair of words: It is not a referential token standing in for a fictional character, much less pointing outward toward a human subject, but a purely grammatical subject that ultimately shifts to "he." Because so brief and under-contextualized, the poem submits readily to such easy reflexivity. The change undergone between the two stanzas ("all / different") is less a cognitive distortion than it is the replacement of a noun by its pronoun. Thus the poem's new grammar ("sit" for "sits") simply makes registerable the old or standard grammatical practice of replacing a noun with a pronoun when it appears later in the same sentence. The novelty defamiliarizes the literal ground of the poem's existence—language—in the same manner that "lighght" quietly (with its extra "gh") makes the medium of light newly perceptible.

The poem's visual appearance sanctions this reading as well. The text's apparently explicit statement is again ironized by the minimality of the difference between the two separate stanzas: the look of the second is striking not as a kind of Herbertian or concretist mimesis (of blood rushing to one's head, say) but in its similarity to its predecessor. The stanzas share a standard grammatical construction (subject-verb-prepositional or adverbial phrase) and in a foreshortened second line. Again, despite the poem's volta (at "-- // then"), little has changed.

The experiential interpretation is unsatisfying because it is too dependent on a fiction of perceptual change (in the post-headstand "man") that is finally "outside the poem." The tightly reflexive interpretation, meanwhile, is unsatisfying in its literal take on Saroyan's protestations: If the text "never never never … refer[s] outside," it turns into a purely grammatical, visual, or material object, leaving little to distinguish it from any other instance of language. In order to balance this outside-inside dynamic without losing sight of the poem's gimmicky quality, we can ask a question that borrows Saroyan's phrasing from just before the repetitions of "never": What are the "horizons … *implicitly inside* the shape of the word constellation" that is "a man stands"? The answer to that question derives from the ways in which Saroyan's emphasis on technological error opens out onto a capacious vision of the site of production. His work certainly "draw[s] attention to its process of coming into being," in Ngai's formulation, but it does so by refusing to perform poetic excellence. That refusal is a manner of self-distancing from certain types of received artistic skills, including even the advanced "'regular' … effects" of Ashbery and Robert Creeley.

The art historian John Roberts has theorized this type of artistic practice under the appropriately infelicitous term “deskilling” (“Art After Deskilling” 86). Roberts traces a trajectory of active, intentional “withdrawal from received skills” within the visual arts that extends from Marcel Duchamp and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, in the early twentieth century, to John Cage, Andy Warhol, and a range of “conceptualising” artists in the postwar era (84). Motivating this “*deflationary logic*,” and thus partially explaining “the absence of would-be palpable skills” (such as perspectival drawing and realistic figuration) in much modern and contemporary art, is a two-pronged negotiation on the part of the artist: a negotiation of a certain distance from “inherited cultural power” and an affiliation or imaginary identification with figures who embody an “exemplary distance *from* this power” (81, 85). By intentionally sabotaging potential demonstrations of skill and technique in her work, the artist attempts to disentangle herself from various kinds of inherited cultural, educational, and economic capital. Such deskilled practitioners have their “real” or economic counterparts: the subjects of the deskilling process that operates, forcibly, by way of the division of labor and technological development, on factory floors and in office spaces. More significant still, for Roberts, than the “fantasy of egalitarianism” embodied in such identifications is the “actual shift in artistic practice” inaugurated by Duchamp. The unassisted readymade juxtaposes the productive and heteronomous labor (embodied in the mass-produced urinal) with the nonproductive and autonomous conceptual labor of the artist (embodied in *Fountain* [1917]). That juxtaposition stresses the “process of conceptualisation and the intellectual acuity the artist brings to art’s material or immaterial forms” and thus opens the visual arts to a broad array of new materials and “conceptual” practices (92).

If visual artworks are "*non-reproducible* forms" that are more or less directly engaged with products of alienated labor, poems of course remain *reproducible forms* composed of the common material of language (87). Yet many of Roberts's descriptions apply quite readily to Saroyan's minimal poems. Those poems undoubtedly suggest, unlike Ashbery's, an "absence of would-be palpable skills" and, unlike Lowell's, the possibility that poetry "can be made with very little labour" (77, 82). In a low-key reprisal of the Duchampian gesture, Saroyan nominates an initial mistake ("by accident I typed") *as* a poem, and that nomination reflects what Roberts calls "the dialectic of skill, deskilling and re-skilling" by placing pressure on the relationship between textual practice and "intellectual acuity."[135] It requires readers to avoid reading traditional signifiers of poetic accomplishment (e.g., the assonance that links "man" and "stands") back into Saroyan's deskilled poems. It forces instead a judgment of the "intellectual acuity" they embody. One entailment of deskilled *poetic* practice is that we can memorize and reproduce poems such as "lighght" and "eyeye" almost effortlessly, whether or not our judgment of them remains inflected by their gimmicky quality. Meanwhile, Roberts's most general point about the avant-garde opposition to "received skills" pertains equally to early twentieth-century visual artists and postwar American poets: "it is impossible to explain the ideals of the early avant-garde," he argues, "without stressing the overwhelming importance artists have placed on *how* they have laboured, in contradistinction to, or identification with, how they perceived others (non-artists) labouring" (1). That frame—which emphasizes the relays between artistic labor and non-artistic labor—is to my mind the most generative one for Saroyan's minimal poems.

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[135] In a 1967 letter, Saroyan writes, "I've discovered that the best work I can do now is to collect single words that happen to strike me and to type each one out in the center of a page. The one word isn't 'mine' but the one word in the center of the page is" (Saroyan to Vito Acconci, 11 September 1967, folder 9, 0 To 9 Papers, NYU Fales Collection; qtd. in Stephens 197-98).

Revisiting "a man stands" in these terms, for instance, enables a far more convincing interpretation than the mimetic-experiential and literal-reflexive ones proposed above. As both the poem's "typo" and its original formatting in a fixed-width typeface indicate, we are in the space of textual production rather than the abstract space of intellection or the bodily space of the mouth that are explored in Ashbery's lines. The lack of difference between the two stanzas signifies that what is "implicitly inside the shape of the word constellation" is an unchanging physical situation: a room with a chair and typewriter, say. Even as the poem's content, such as it is, deftly ducks the possibility of being read as the subjective expression of a person typing out words (i.e., "a man stands … one minute // then he / type"), its form insists on the scene of production as one of dependent typing. To the extent that the poem can be said to refer to anything "outside" its verbal structure, it is to the site of composition, which we can term *the scene of typing*.

Once we understand Saroyan's minimal poems to be fundamentally about the scene of typing, the opening lines reveal an economic relationship: "a man stands / on his / head" refers to two distinct agents. Either the man presses on his *own* head, as in a situation of freely given artistic labor, or a boss-man stands "on" a secondary working figure, as in a situation of wage-labor or piecework production. If this reading seems to generate a full-fledged narrative situation, it is also registered in the poem's "shape." The first man, in his first stanza, emblematizing the human head, is above or atop the second man. The second man's stanza emblematizes the workspace in which the head has been pressed upon or smushed by regulated "brainwork" or headwork: "one / minute" counted out in the tick-tock of the typewriter's "--." In the process, that stanza transforms into a just slightly smaller (disempowered) version of its superior: something deskilled and disempowered, something closer to the "manual" body, arm, or hand. Here the slight difference in word and syllable count between the two stanzas finally takes on interpretative weight. Additionally, the syllabic ambivalence of "different" (parsable as either two or three syllables) reflects both the smooshing of the second agent (the worker) and the smallness of the difference between writing as externally enforced wage-labor and writing as autonomously determined art. In this situation, art-working remains thoroughly "inside" the work-working of productive labor.

The work ethic, with its requirements of self-management, is the belief-system that negotiates that difference. That is, if "a man" in this interpretation is both a distinct character (i.e., a boss) *and* the writer's own internalized self-discipline, the poem can be seen to index both the minimality and the enormity of that distinction. The apparent *minimality* of the difference between the autonomous labor of the artist-writer and the alienated labor of the wage-writer is what the slight difference between the stanzas (between "a man" and "he") and between appropriate grammar and distorted grammar indexes. Simultaneously, the error looms over the entire poem and insists on that small difference as making "all" the difference.

Saroyan would later, in a collection of essays published in 2000, reflect quite precisely on both the dailiness and the "little" political-economic implications of that distinction:

> To make a long story short, then, in my mid-forties [c. 1990] I began a new phase in which I took the sort of jobs that usually *precede* literary careers… My job involved coordinating and making presentations about government services available to laid-off workers and also included writing press releases and various kinds of reports, and there were interims during which none of that, or anything else, needed immediate attention.

> One afternoon in the cubicle during one of those interims, I started to write a play. The play virtually exploded in my computer monitor, I should say. …
>
> There I was, in my cubicle, with coworkers going by. With certain of the coworkers, too, I was coordinating presentations, so there was always that little buzz of danger in the fact that my computer monitor was full of characters and dialogue that had nothing to do with the Employment Development Department or the Job Training Partnership Act, of which I was the vested representative to the citizens of Ventura County. (*Door to the River* 72)

From within his role as a digitally administered public information professional, the poet slacks off by way of an exceedingly small "diversionary practice" (De Certeau 24).[136] He performs just-barely-different but also utterly-different artistic work while on the clock. "a man stands" presides over Saroyan's minimalist project as a whole because the meaning of that project—the meaning of Saroyan-style minimalism—is precisely the excessive smallness of the difference between those two kinds of intellectual labor. Saroyan's even shorter poems, in turn, explore the proximity of those two kinds of labor by presenting language and language-production as neither immaterial nor concrete but as weakly and dependently material.

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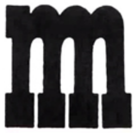
[136] There is a wide range of relevant literature on slacking off or "soldiering" in the factory and office. Michel de Certeau, for example, describes "what in France is called *la perruque*, 'the wig.' *La perruque* is the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job. … The worker who indulges in *la perruque* actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit. … To deal with everyday tactics in this way would be to practice an 'ordinary art', to find oneself in the common situation, and to make a kind of *perruque* of writing itself" (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 25, 28; qtd. in Bernstein, *My Way* 128).

4. Weak Matter

Minimalist poetry presents a particularly convenient point for engaging the more generalized discomfort with skillful execution and artistic "excellence" that ranges from Lowell to Brooks to Antin, O'Hara, Ginsberg, and Ashbery. On the one hand, the minimal poems of Saroyan and his predecessors and peers such as William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley, Vito Acconci, Robert Grenier, and Clark Coolidge—with their low word counts, short lines, and highly restricted vocabularies—may strike readers as exceptionally "poetic" in their commitment to condensation. As I rehearsed in my introductory chapter, and as Ashton reminds us, M. H. Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms* has for over fifty years, in edition after edition with only minor variations, defined the "lyric" in a manner that has helped it assume the mantle of poetry and "the poetic" more generally: "any fairly short poem, uttered by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought, and feeling" (Abrams 179; Ashton 216-17). Recall how over the last two decades scholars of historical poetics, most especially Virginia Jackson, have argued that "the lyric takes form through the development of reading practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that become the practice of literary criticism" (*Dickinson's Misery* 8). In Jackson's scholarship, centered on the critical approaches to the texts of Emily Dickinson, a set of "lyric reading" practices and conceptions of "lyric language" have been naturalized, handed down, and critiqued for over two centuries (13-14). If those practices are almost always bound up with and frequently mention brevity (Abrams's "fairly short"), they firmly emphasize, and are in Jackson's account circumscribed by, "the idealized moment of expression" (Abrams's "single speaker, who expresses") (13). Jackson argues that in spite of those variable critiques, what we might call "the fiction of the lyric" still has a strong hold on contemporary writing and reading practices. That fiction has helped create and, in Jackson's view, still determines "the practice of literary criticism."

Significantly, the criterion from Abrams's definition that has been less remarked upon ("fairly short") fits well with both one common understanding of the adjective "poetic," wherein it signifies something like "just the right phrasing" or "in the fewest possible words," *and* with the zero-degree trajectory of minimalism. In Saroyan, the "fairly short" of M. H. Abrams's definition of "lyric" is given its full due. On the one hand, questions about whether and why the shortness of poems matters come to the fore by way of preposterous or gimmicky reduction. On the other hand, in ordinary usage "poetic" frequently functions as a kind of slur meaning "flowery" or "excessive," as in an overmuchness of more neutral qualities such as "figurative" and "imaginative." Saroyan's minimalism inhabits this apparent double bind by insisting, over and over in different manners, on the link between excess and scarcity. Consider Saroyan's single-grapheme poem: an oversized, four-legged "m" that is the most concrete, most aggressively visual poem in the author's compact oeuvre (see Fig. 14):



Aram Saroyan (1965–66)
A poster-poem.

Fig. 14. Four-Legged "m," 1966.

Included in *Aram Saroyan* (1968), the piece is here adorned with a novel generic tag—“poster-poem”—that calls direct attention to its size (CMP 28). This framing thus asks us to consider the unusual “m” as simultaneously exceeding and falling short of the generic labels (lyric, poem, poetry) whose apparent capaciousness Jackson and Yopie Prins have critiqued. The term “poem” in this case is awkward; it is both insufficient and too grandiose. Necessitating a hyphenated compound, Saroyan’s work requires more assistance or attention than it seems to deserve. Likewise, the label underscores how the piece both questions the material constraints and scale of the normative book page, which cannot accommodate a full “poster,” while still fitting neatly upon just such a page.

Otherwise, the poem stands alone, immobile and encumbered. In approaching but not reaching an endpoint of reduction—in seeming at first glance like a hoax—it requires “sublyric” reading practices from its audience, asking them to consider how its extreme but conflicted brevity teases and parries critical approaches that would emphasize “the idealized moment of expression.” It seems not simply to forestall Jacksonian “lyric reading” but to elicit both strong reactions and a potential bevy of interpretations, asking the reader or viewer to do the work of compensating for its own awkward shape and its lack of “expression.” In doing so, Saroyan’s poster-poem calls attention to how it must necessarily demand particular typesetting or drawing procedures from its publisher. In this way, it is emblematic of brevity’s uneasy relationship to writerly labor: The poem seems at once like an easy gag or gimmick and obstructively difficult to reproduce. As it asks readers to do its work for it, by seeming to do too little itself, it is also difficult to replicate—I cannot type it appropriately, for instance. To the extent that the poster-poem thus requires elaboration (in the form of an image or a critical description) rather than re-typing, it seems to defamiliarize itself while also recalling the way Pound's very short poems elicit elaborate anecdote and annotation.

Nevertheless, the term "concrete" seems only barely appropriate for this four-legged letter. It is less dispersed than the turn-of-the-century visual poems of Mallarmé; less bellicose than the Futurist and Vorticist typographical experiments of the early twentieth-century; less playfully mimetic than the midcentury visual poems of the Brazilian Noigandres group; less intensely material than the contemporaneous pieces found alongside Saroyan's contributions in the *Chicago Review*'s international *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967); and far less chaotic than the slightly later poster-sized typewriter works by Steve McCaffery. Rather, Saroyan's "hardest" and inkiest poem reads as quite gentle. The lowercase type, the thin and sloping legs, and the soft "m" sound the grapheme suggests (even as it remains in-articulable) highlight the almost cartoon-like way in which two or three "n's" have melded or an "m" has branched out. Moreover, the tucked away growth in the middle of the familiar letter "m" calls to mind the soft spot in the middle of the alphabet where children tend to blur their pronunciation: "elemenopee." If the poem is monstrous—a strange creature or element growing in the middle of the alphabet or off the end of "Saroyan"—it is *mildly* and gently so. Both its mild materiality and its linking of minimalism (very little text) to excess (an extra leg) are characteristic of Saroyan's short poems more generally. One antithesis to the kind of "radical guilt" that generates the workaholic practice on display in Lowell's *Collected Poems*, then, is the sense of easy error that resonates throughout Saroyan's *Complete Minimal Poems* (Carruth 67).

The handful of extant discussions of Saroyan focus on his variety and the different ways his poems toy with perception rather than on the poems' shared resonances, humorous or otherwise. *Complete Minimal Poems* indeed presents a bevy of resources for practicing writers;

there's much to be said for their technical range and the diverse ways in which they tug at matters of visual, verbal, and mental perception. However, I want to highlight instead the key qualities those poems have in common. In addition to low word counts, short lines, and a restricted lexicon, notable family resemblances include: (1) a de-emphasis on skill and effort; (2) a kind of weak or thin materiality; (3) an interest in the tight relationship between scarcity and excess; and (4) a near-unity born out of the limited number of parts in each poem, which triggers the sense that each either simply "works" or "does not work" (a binary formulation that can be translated into reader-response terminology: "I get it" or "I don't get it"). These four qualities are interrelated and, as we will see, they flesh out Saroyan's particular strain of deskilling.

If the one-"letter" poem "m" suggests a productive or childishly gross mistake, then the one-word poems Saroyan originally prints in a fixed-width type-face—such as "`Blod`," "`piit`," "`lobstee`," and "`torgh`"—invoke the typo more directly (CMP 33, 90, 94, 95). In his preface to the second edition of the *Complete Minimal Poems*, Ron Silliman reads the first of these as "call[ing] up not merely the words *blood* and *bod*, but all the sexuality that truncated latter term conveys, refusing to settle on one side or the other" (7). This is an elegant reading, but in its focus on reception ("calls up," "conveys") it leaves out the short-circuiting of standard spelling and pronunciation the nonce-word's truncation evidences. Minimal poems like "Blod" and "torgh," in intimating both typographical error and frustration (imagine appending exclamation marks), insist on the fact of the writer-at-the-typewriter. In Ngai's formulation, they make the means of (artistic) production decidedly visible. They testify to the site of composition—the scene of typing—by providing obvious signs of withdrawal from received skills and knowledge.

If this typically takes places through foreshortening, even Saroyan's early "long" poem, "crickets," carries this resonance (see Fig. 15).

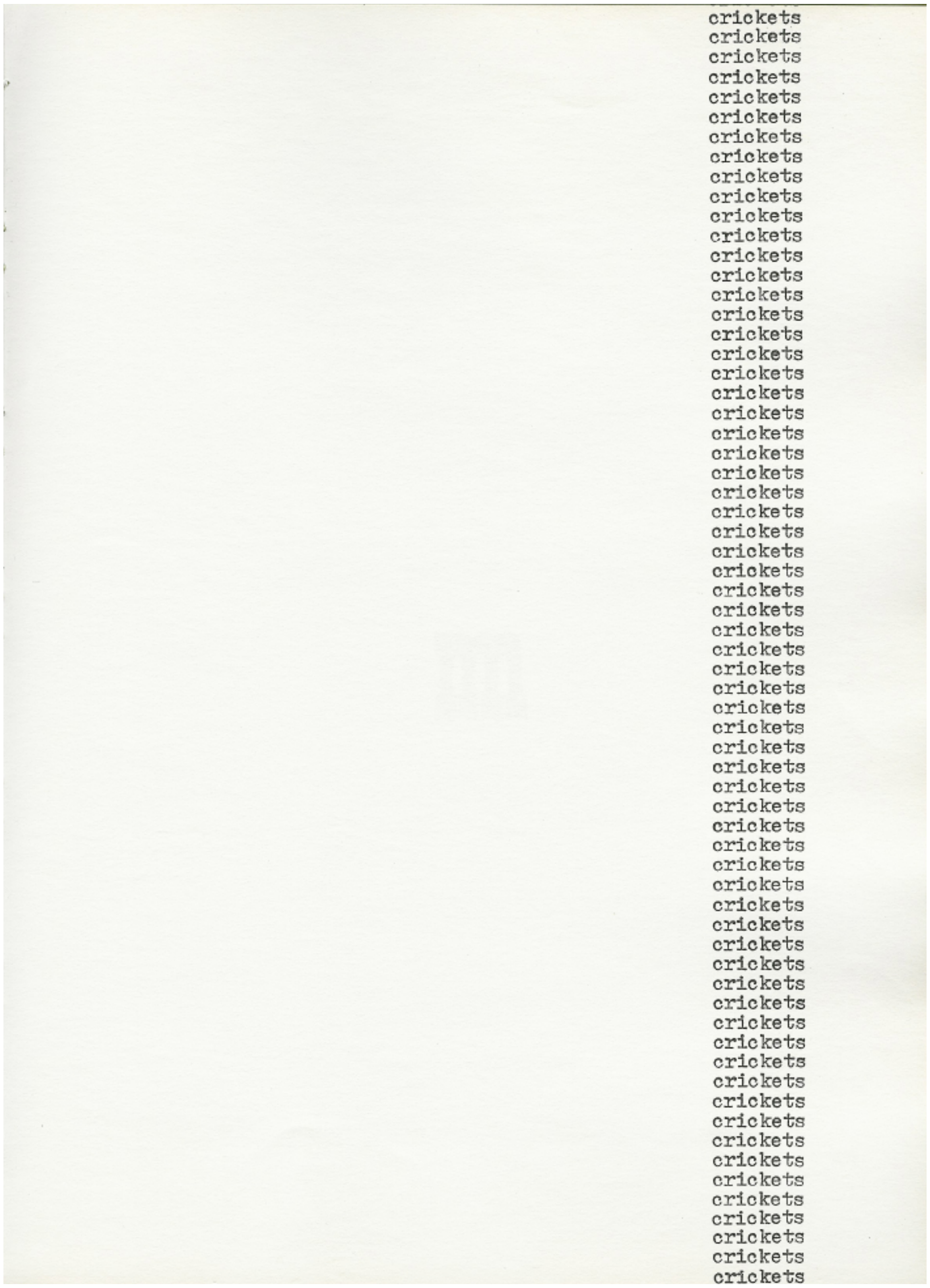


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Fig. 15. "crickets," ***Aram Saroyan*****, 1968.**

A straight column of the word "crickets" repeated down the right-hand side of the page replaces the traditional figure of poetic inspiration and natural talent, the songbird, with an insect best known for producing repetitive, rhythmic noises. The cricket, that is, stands in as kind of very mediocre bird, one that denies the possibility of misreading its noise as freighted with meaning. In aligning himself with crickets and the "incomprehensible birds" of a later poem, as well as with the joke that falls flat (eliciting "crickets" rather than laughter), Saroyan avoids both the model of poetry-as-craft *and* its most available alternative, poetry-as-inspiration (CMP 70).

Characteristically, "crickets" backs away from both cultivatable abilities like those found in Lowell (metrical rambunctiousness, revision) *and* the sort of improvised and incantatory poetics championed, if not always practiced, by Ginsberg. The "crickets" poem might seem to suggest the latter inasmuch as the cricket's characteristic noise operates onomatopoeically. The semi-onomatopoetic descriptor traditionally used to designate the sound of a cricket, "chirp," is an unavailable resource, in this poem, because it fails to distinguish itself from the chirp of a bird. As a result, the name of the insect is made to do double-duty as the form of the insect's sound: "to cricket" works in a way that "to dog" or "to bird" do not. In a 1965 reading, Saroyan clarifies this by articulating the poem with little affect (distinguishing it from chant-based poetics) and by sustaining the "s" sounds, which fill the sonic space between lines. That verbal unison of noise and noisemaker, however, is not the type of singular identification of lyric self-expression with "the valued representation of subjectivity" that Ashton has recently characterized as ubiquitous in postwar poetry (217). Rather, the stack of "crickets" functions as a dull chorus: in the recording, the sounds follow one another rapidly and blend together. The visual poem on the page is even more effective inasmuch as it seems to pulsate as a single unit rather than advance from line to line.

If my readings of “crickets” and “m” have touched briefly and implicitly on the characteristic “weakness” shared broadly across Saroyan’s minimal poems, I want to provide one additional reading before engaging in more depth with Saroyan’s best-known poem and its reception history. The poem “Bus Ride” (1966) has two parts (CMP 59):

1

a red tractor
  a red tractor
            etcetera

2

fences / finished

Saroyan’s earliest major publication was of six poems and a piece of nonfiction (a review of Robert Creeley’s 1963 novel *The Island*) in *Poetry* magazine in April 1964. That set of six poems began with “A Bus Stop,” where were are told explicitly that “light” (specifically the “instant” of lightening) outstrips the speed of “the words // which / follow.” The poem “Bus Ride”—first published two years later in the red (corrective) ink of the appropriately titled *Works*—is a rewriting of and rebuttal to the earlier, garrulous “A Bus Stop” (which comes to fifteen lines and thirty-three words, excluding the title).

The minimalism of the later “Bus Ride” “withdraws from, and adulterates, inherited technique” in order to enact the perception of two different objects from the window of a moving vehicle: object, object, blur; object, gone (Roberts, “Art After Deskilling” 81). And neither of its two enactments takes the form of a made “image.” The pair of mini-poems, while put together with enough care to elicit specific perceptual meanings, nevertheless highlight their own looseness far more than they highlight constructedness, an “original way of thinking,” a "concrete approach," or "Stone-cutting all the way" (Faville 36, 31, 73). The first does this by way of a blunt allusion to William Carlos Williams's "XXII" or "The Red Wheelbarrow," itself a minimal poem that evinces far more skillful precision or "glaze[]" with its careful word and syllable counts and its subtle outward referencing ("So much depends") to the prose text in which it is embedded (224). The second does this by highlighting how a single graphic post, the slash, is sufficient to accomplish the representation of perception that the poem seeks before it is quickly "finished." This generalized de-emphasis on skill and effort is bound up with an interest in the relation between the minimal and the excessive ("etcetera") and the thin materiality of paper and ink ("/"). Each section, moreover, achieves a quasi-unity through, rather than in spite of, its unworkedness. The first reiterates an identical unit in the same manner as do Saroyan's vertical number poems—such as "23 / 23 / 23 / 23 […]"—and the minimal sculptures of Donald Judd, whom Saroyan cites as an influence and whom he renders in his one-word poem "Judd…" (173, 161). The second section approaches wholeness by way of the speed at which it is "finished" and the sense of "Did you get it?" it begs. That mediated quickness recalls the claim on the back of one of Saroyan's books: "The text of *Words & Photographs* [1970] was written *one afternoon* in the summer of 1969" (emphasis added). It also recalls the episode in 1968 when Saroyan's first full book of poetry was read "cover-to-cover, on the local six o'clock NBC News, by Edwin Newman wearing his cultural commentator hat" (*Starting Out* 3).

These rapid relays of writing (production) and reading (reception) *derive* from the difference in the visual experience of writing by typewriter or computer as opposed to by hand: That difference is then characterized, by Saroyan, as a style of "Marijuana Notation" (105). The noun in that descriptor ("notation") derives from the Latin for "mark" rather than, like "writing," the Old English for "score, form (letters) by carving" and the Old German for "sketch, drag." A note on the back cover of *Pages* (1969) fortifies this distinction:

> I write on a typewriter, almost never in hand (I can hardly handwrite, I tend to draw words), and my machine—an obsolete red-top Royal Portable—is the biggest influence on my work. This red hood holds the mood, keeps my eye happy. The type-face is a standard pica; if it were another style I'd write (subtly) different poems. And when a ribbon gets dull my poems I'm sure change. (n.p.)

For Lowell, "your life is your hands"; for Saroyan, handwriting is simultaneously too difficult (he can "hardly" do it) and too distracting (he "tend[s] to draw words"). In his autobiographical novel *The Street* (1974), the younger poet is even more forceful on this point: "I was a typewriter" (82). The unpretentiousness of that identification marks a distinction between the mechanistic wordplay and eye-play that the minimalist pursues and the artisanal qualities of handwriting and hand-drawing. In so doing, it amends the tendency in the few existing considerations of Saroyan's work to accentuate its interest in textual materiality over and against transparency.[137] The author's hand falls into (partial) disuse and requires a machinic aid-to-making because when he attempts to handwrite his words come out as drawings rather than communicative symbols. The typewriter, itself "obsolete," thus provides not a means of getting closer to language-as-signifier but a limit to that trajectory. Saroyan's type-notated poems present the "matter" of language in egalitarian "standard pica," and they present that matter as light, thin, or weak. Their lodestar is *near*-transparency.

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[137] See Faville, "Stone Cutting All The Way" and Silliman, "Preface."

The evocations of the act of typewriting throughout *Complete Minimal Poems*, the machinic quality of the crickets, and the agency of the vehicle in “Bus Ride” all affirm the easy, assisted, and highly mediated labor of Saroyan’s minimalism. The evident effortlessness of “Bus Ride,” however, has a hidden slower rival in the kind of manual farm-work insinuated by its tractors and fences. It sits in opposition to the repetitive physical exertion required, on the part of the absent fence-maker, to go from fence-posts (or stones, as in Frost’s “Mending Wall”) to a “finished” fence. Recall, here, the emphasis that Roberts places on “the overwhelming importance artists have placed on *how* they have laboured, in contradistinction to, or identification with, how they perceived others (non-artists) labouring” (*Intangibilities* 1). Along those lines, I would insist on the importance of the distinction Saroyan posits between the highly visible ease and mistakenness of his artistic efforts and the offstage labor of using tractors and constructing enclosures. Saroyan’s poems suggest the difficulty of linking these two kinds of work—even ironically as Lowell tries to in “Our fathers wrung their bread from stocks and stones.” The younger poet makes visible the ease of his own intangible and deskilled post-Fordist labor while leaving the farm-work implicit.

5. “These Little Uglies”: Governmental Literary Criticism in the Seventies

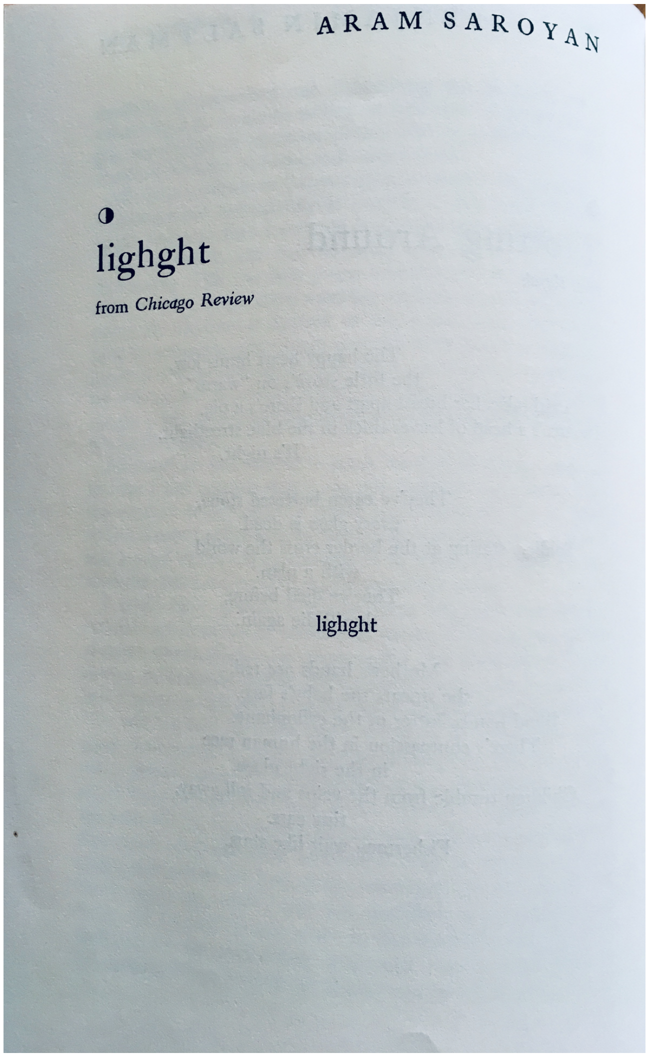
The means by which visibility itself is achieved is the overt “subject” of Saroyan’s most famous poem. Yet “lighght,” in its low-key presentation (as opposed to the oversized four-legged “m”) and its commitment to the single lexeme (whether understood as a word, nonce-word, or non-word), not only embodies but also intensifies the qualities of weakness and dependence described previously, by way of simplification. It is also the only poem of Saroyan’s that has a substantial reception history: it was the text on the receiving end of the most extensive bout of literary criticism in the history of the U.S. Congress, from its birth in 1789 to the present day. Examining the characteristic rhetorical moves of the debate surrounding Saroyan in Congress—which began in 1970, continued at inconsistent intervals, and reemerged with renewed fervency in 1997—will accomplish two tasks. First, it will enhance and complicate the readings of the features of Saroyan's minimalism offered above by providing a historically relevant non-poetic discursive context, linking the poem's public life to the two most important shifts in NEA policy (which occurred in the early 1970s and the mid 1990s). Second, it will suggest a more broadly allegorical interpretation of Saroyan's minimalist poems as they situate themselves in and against that context.

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) were signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in the White House Rose Garden on September 29, 1965, at the crest of both an economic boom and a Democratic wave. One of the earliest major literary projects to receive funding was *The American Literary Anthology* orchestrated by George Plimpton (founder and editor of the *Paris Review*) and Peter Ardery. The co-editors explain the premise of the project in their preface to the first volume, published in 1968:

> In 1966 the National Endowment for the Arts appropriated $55,000 to publish an anthology of material selected from American literary and 'little' magazines. In brief, the functions of the grant were: to publish *The American Literary Anthology / 1*, which, through wide distribution, would give greater circulation to work that originally appeared in magazines or literary papers with limited circulations; to supplement the small payments, if any, made by such magazines by offering grants to those writers selected--

> $1,000 for each essay, work of fiction, or critical piece, $500 for each poem; and to reward the magazines and literary journals which had the perspicacity to publish the selections in the first place by awarding grants of $500 and $250 to the individual editors, for use in the development of their magazines. (v)

Plimpton and Ardery's explanation of the "functions" of their anthology project mirrors the tenor of the discussions on the floors of the House and Senate in 1964 and 1965, as well as the law creating the Endowments. The rhetoric combines an emphasis on aesthetic quality ("reward," "perspicacity") with the notion of beneficence directed toward the "little" and "limited" ("great circulation," "supplement," "development"). Saroyan's work, itself tiny and published primarily in "little" magazines and small editions, fit the criteria well enough to be selected for both the first and second installments by two different groups of poetry judges: John Ashbery, Robert Creeley, and James Dickey, followed by Robert Duncan, Anne Sexton, and Louis Simpson. If it was primarily the fact that the judges associated with Black Mountain College were predisposed to include Saroyan (Duncan was, in fact, the editor of the *Chicago Review* "Anthology of Concretism" issue that included "lighght"), the explorations of smallness and scale undertaken by his minimal poems serendipitously shine some light on the goals and controversies involved in public funding of the arts in mid-century America (Ardery 2, viii). Figure 16 shows how the poem appeared on page 307 of volume two, in the anthology's standard typeface rather than in Saroyan's original typewriter-style Courier.



ARAM SAROYAN

◑

lighght

from *Chicago Review*

lighght

Fig. 16. “lighght,” *American Literary Anthology / 2*, 1969.

That year also saw Richard Nixon assume the presidency, and Nixon perceived the “modern art and music” of the times as directly opposed to his self-interest because they were being made and consumed primarily by his political opponents, as he noted in a recently released January 26, 1970 memo sent to H. R. “Bob” Haldeman, his White House Chief of Staff:

> I am not going to have 40 million dollars scattered all over the country in projects of this type… I found in travelling around the world that many of our Ambassadors were

> displaying the modern art due to the fact that they were compelled to because of some committee which once was headed up by Mrs. Kefauver and where they were loaned some of these little uglies from the Museum of Modern Art in New York. (1)

Though disinclined to fund “those activities in the cultural field which were ‘novel’ and broke new ground,” Nixon was, however, steadfastly in favor of the NEA. He actively sought to foster more “traditional activities,” and early in his first term he began publicly advocating for a doubling of the endowment’s funding, from $20 to $40 million. That advocacy coincided with his appointment of Nancy Hanks as Chairman of the NEA in 1969. Hanks would go on to be the endowment’s most skillful and influential leader, outlasting Nixon himself and running the endowment until late 1977.

If “lighght” would seem to fall into the category of “these little uglies,” the opposition to the poem was less a manifestation of Nixon-style *realpolitik* than of economic ideology. The poem began attracting negative press in March of 1970 after Representative William Scherle (R-IA), a hardline fiscal conservative, was alerted of its existence. Scherle would in fact repeatedly go on record in the early 1970s in opposition to Nixon over spending issues, and in his eyes “lighght” was exemplary as a beneficiary of undue federal largesse. He condemned the poem in his newsletter and spread the word to the local and national press. Then, on April 7, 1970, he dragged “lighght” itself onto the House floor. According to Scherle, Plimpton phoned to berate the Congressman for denigrating Saroyan’s poem. In his speech, Scherle presents Plimpton, the “Self-Appoint Cultural Czar,” as “emotionally upset” and “irrational,” in contrast to his own neutral, quantitative “disclosure” that Plimpton’s “government program was doling out $750 for seven letter poems, to wit—lighght—that do not even spell a word" (10634).[138] As part of his remarks, the Congressman included a lengthy excerpt from his newsletter:

> However, the topper of this tomfoolery is the awarding of a prize to Aram Saroyan, son of the noted American author William Saroyan. His "masterpiece" may well be recorded in history as the most expensive printed material ever thrust upon the unsuspecting American taxpayer. The poem consists of only seven letters! For the edification of those who are footing the bill, I reprint the entire poem which resulted in the expenditure of $750 in federal funds, or $107.14 per letter…. Culture should not be spoon-fed to an effete elite at the expense of the general public. There exists in this country a thing called free enterprise. If seven-letter poems turn on some people, then they should pay for the joy rather than force our hard-working taxpayers to subsidize their cultural taste. (10634)

Scherle links hoaxes, gimmicks, and novelties ("topper of tomfoolery") as well as the counter-culture itself ("turn on") to his central concern with government waste. Such waste is best exemplified by the smallest possible things—"only seven letters!" The politician's duty is to side with the "hard-working." And, on principle, one should feed rather than be "spoon-fed" by way of subsidy. Scherle's brimful style and quick switches of tone contrast tellingly with the bareness of "—lighght—." That style, in turn, incarnates Scherle's invocation and intertwining of three major discourses: of scale, the work ethic, and self-sufficiency.

Whatever its excesses, Scherle's attack proved to be only the opening salvo in what would become a long-running public interrogation of a single tiny poem. By my reckoning,

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[138] Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from politicians and government documents are cited with reference to the date and page number(s) in the *Congressional Record (Bound Edition)*.

Saroyan's "lighght" makes an appearance (sometimes brief and other times extended) in the Congressional Record in the years 1970, 1971, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1990, and 1997. That compendium of official government discussions reflects, in microcosm, the general sensibility of the debates surrounding the NEA since its founding. At the moment when Scherle brings Saroyan into brief prominence, the specific concern is Nixon's direct request that Congress double the amount of spending on the arts and humanities. In his initial ask, Nixon repeatedly invokes an inverted version of the scale-logic used by Scherle. By increasing monetary support, he insists, "We would begin to readdress the imbalance between the sciences and the humanities." Nixon adds, "Few investments we could make would give us so great a return" (1970 22126, qtd. from 10 Dec. 1969). Smallness, cost-effectiveness, and potential "spiritual" returns are all points in favor of expanded funding (22126).

Nixon's language reflects the way in which scale is frequently invoked in public discussions of the arts during the period, invocations that range from the brutally practical to the sublime. Rep. Edward J. Patten (D-New Jersey) remarks, "the record shows that the Federal Government plans to spend $40.79 of every $100 for defense costs in the 1971 budget, but that only 2 cents of every $100 is allocated for the arts and humanities. Such a disparity is unfair, unwise, and unsound in a free country" (1970 10435). The hard facts here serve as a reminder that this debate is happening amid the overriding "bigness" of the Vietnam War. Patten's sequence of unstressed alliteration in his final sentence, meanwhile, paves the way for the peroration he quotes from John F. Kennedy: "The quality of America's cultural life is an element of immense importance in the scales by which our worth will be weighed" (10435).

The leaps that "art," as a category or set of practices, seem to make in these discussions from vulnerable and undernourished to apocalyptic in "importance" suggest that it is the genuine mystery of those magical leaps that Saroyan's poem somehow captures and makes uncomfortably proximate for the Members of Congress. Politician after politician throw up their hands, refusing to play the interpretive game with such stuff as "lighght." Saroyan's poem is linked to a "boondoggle" here and a "monstrosity" there, and parodies such as "ZQXQZQ" and accidental revisions such as "Lithit" pop up repeatedly (22120; 22145; Joint Hearing 48).[139] These attacks are always made in order to insist that "lighght" obviously did not take "a great deal of ingenuity" or require the kind of effort taxpayers have the right to expect (22122). The NEA's defenders tip-toe around "lighght," the NEA's critics grow more and more exacerbated, and everyone avoids making interpretive claims.

The poem's persistence as a point of contention speaks to its tensing of the work ethic and of the surprising sociality of its asocial refusal to say more. If that were all, though, its amusing public life might be understood as little more than that of a political football. Instead, the Congressional reactions to "lighght" are telling in two more substantial respects. First, the overt statements of Scherle and his ilk regarding Saroyan reflect a real position within the field of (literary) criticism that we can designate as the "reactionary modernist" viewpoint; second, the *outcome* of their reactions—which is to say, the substantive change in NEA policy in the wake of the controversy and compromises surrounding "lighght"—function as a relatively progressive interpretation of the poem that responds to its allegorical demand for support.

Scherle's core dispute with Plimpton regarding "lighght" concerns his sense that the poem has not worked hard enough to earn its keep. The victim is the "unsuspecting" and "hard-working" average American taxpayer who, in being forced to "subsidize" such minimal efforts, is in effect cheated. Scherle's contrasting touchstone for authentic cultural activity is Paul Engle, head of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop from 1941 until 1965 and founder, in 1967, of the International Writing Program affiliated with the University. In 1973, Scherle reads into the Congressional Record a newspaper tribute to Engle that praises the accomplished poet-administrator for the programs he "nurtured … to success with his own hard work" (5 June 1973 18215).[140] The piece, recognizing the "Tribute of Appreciation" Engle had received recently from the U.S. Department of State, goes on to highlight how "[a]side from private contributions, [Engle] has had little, if any, help from the state itself or from the university other than to make facilities available." It is, for the Iowa Representative as for the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, as much the demonstration of independent initiative as the accomplishments themselves that makes Engle worthy of recognition.

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[139] Regarding these "more generative than destructive … effects," see Luck, "'Lighght' Reading."

Contemporary defenses of modernism are grounded in a corresponding distinction between earned and unearned attention. The critic Hilton Kramer, for instance, repeatedly contrasts the impulsive avant-gardism of Alfred Jarry, Futurism, and Dada with that of a quieter advanced guard, represented by figures such as Picasso, Matisse, and T. S. Eliot. In Kramer's "The Age of the Avant-Garde" (1973), the key difference between these strains of artistic achievement is work. The former "added only a marginal increment to the monumental achievements" preceding their own and in effect "lived off the practices—the traditions and piecemeal revisions—their ideology loudly condemned" (40). The latter, meanwhile, were "working their way toward those fundamental revisions of established pictorial practice that proved to be basis of modernist painting in the 20th century." In Eliot's words, quoted by Kramer, "Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor." In these remarks, we can begin to recognize the correspondence between Scherle's pseudo-populist privileging of self-reliance and a subtler insistence, in the contemporary critical literature, on what comes to be described, with respect to the artwork itself, as self-sufficient.

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[140] A similar tribute (by Bob Jones, also writing for the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*) was read in the House record by Rep. John Culver (D-Iowa) on May 16, 1973 (16043).

Perhaps the most influential postwar account of aesthetic sufficiency was published by Michael Fried in *Art Forum* a few years earlier prior. This is not the place to perform a full rereading of a much-discussed essay, Fried's "Art and Objecthood" (1967), but in preparation for the turn taken by Governmental Literary Criticism in the 1990s, which I discuss below and which relates to current (2010s) accounts of postwar American poetry that themselves depend heavily on Fried's thinking, it will be helpful to remind ourselves just how central *work* is to Fried's early, influential accounts. "Art and Objecthood" famously begins with a quotation about (and from) the Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards and concludes on the weighty affirmation, "Presentness is grace" (*Art and Objecthood* 168). Approximately halfway between these twin nods to a Calvinist conception of artistic achievement, Fried clarifies his argument in terms that correspond to Kramer's. The "theatrical effect" of minimalist or literalist art (rather than properly modernist painting and sculpture) is, for Fried, "a function not just of the obtrusiveness and, often, even aggressiveness of literalist work, but *of the special complicity that that work extorts* from the beholder" (155, emphasis added). This echoes the general sentiment of Fried's own earlier argument in "Modernist Painting and Criticism" (1964) where he likewise distinguishes legitimate, "genuinely exploratory," and "fecund[]" modernist painting from the non-art "that seems merely to exploit the formal innovations of prior modernists" (647-48). The encounter with minimalist objects, by Fried's logic, is analogous to being extorted or exploited. The would-be beholder is treated unfairly by the non-artwork, which he experiences as a "surrogate person";

that resonant phrase cinches the critic's sense of being asked too much by an entity that, because it is itself insufficiently giving, is no more than a hollow substitute (*Art and Objecthood* 156).

Fried's account is more nuanced than Kramer's and leagues more subtle than anything put forward by Scherle or his compatriots. Yet it would be a mistake, I think, to dismiss Scherle's complaint as merely that of a pseudo-populist villain. The objections to "lighght" made by him and other members of Congress over the years (from 1970 to 1997) reflect a sense of being deceived or cheated that resembles the accounts offered by eminent critics and historians of the arts. Collectively, those reactionary accounts of what Fried later refers to as "'mainstream' modernism"—which defend the hardworking artwork against the mere surrogates who "live[] off" its practices—accurately capture the withdrawal from received skills that "lighght" highlights by way of reduction and error ("How Modernism Works" 220n3, 224; Kramer 40).

The intuitions of Fried, Kramer, and members of Congress take on a kind of interpretive function and land precisely on the issues of skill and the undermining of the work ethic that I began to elaborate in my close readings earlier. They are accurate readings (in the sense of "gaugings") to the extent that Saroyan's poems are made and un-made in a way as to beg the question of their workedness over and over. For the NEA's critics in the 1970s, of course, such readings were intended to undermine Nixon's policy of increasing the Endowment's budget. The actual aftermath of Saroyan's award, Plimpton's outburst, and the prolonged Congressional debate were limited but not insignificant: a reduction in the size of the 1971 budget increase (from $40 million authorized to $35 million appropriated); an early death for *The American Literary Anthology* series; and an end to the more general practice of rewarding past endeavors in favor of an exclusive focus on funding future work.

That last change is telling. In the first volume of their anthology, Plimpton and Ardery explain how the “need for such an anthology has existed for some time” and that the American Literary Magazine Association and commercial publishers in New York “weren’t interested” (v):

> Neither were the foundations, though the anthology plan seemed such a simple method of getting money to deserving writers and editors: rewarding them for excellence, indeed compensating them for what they had done and been ill paid for. Invariably, the foundations were more concerned with writers of reputation who had ‘projects’ in mind, as if the future was what they wished to underwrite. Naturally, theirs was a policy which made it almost impossible to get money to unknown writers whose sole “project” is to get themselves into print. (v-vi)

The funding of future work is safer in part because it centers on “writers of reputation” (a factor the NEA application process mitigates but still reflects). But it is also safer because it avoids the problem of post-hoc evaluation. If evaluation on primarily aesthetic grounds, as in the specialized panels used in the *Anthology* series, is tricky enough, the fact is that on the floor of the House the poems aren’t evaluated based on purely aesthetic criteria but by the demands of the work ethic. The resulting reactions reflect the fact that switching the criteria just doesn’t compute: aesthetic merit does not necessarily correlate with labor-time, skill, or effort. In early 1970, the circuit is shorted and the debate goes haywire because Saroyan’s poem is *about* that non-correlation. The ability of “lighght” to produce widespread aversion and hesitance even among defenders of the NEA speaks to the way Saroyan’s poems call attention to both the lack of skill and effort entailed in their making and, simultaneously, their means of production understood broadly as physical (the typewriter, the media of ink and paper), institutional (language, Random House), and human (Saroyan's necessarily intangible and intentionally self-confounding labor). The fact that none of those aspects can entirely account for whatever aesthetic quality the poem may have is what makes their visibility unnerving.

From this perspective, it is easy to see why the NEA began phasing out "the practice of making grants to artists in recognition of work already completed" in the early 1970s, despite the persuasive counterarguments already in print from Plimpton and Ardery (Falk 11). In the wake of the debates surrounding the *American Literary Anthology* series, in particular, the temporal logic of the remaining grants for individual artists changed: "The idea now is 'to buy time for future creativity,'" the Wall Street Journal reports in late July of 1970, quoting the Endowment's Chairwoman (Falk 11). In their history of U.S. funding for the arts, from prior to 1965 up until 1984, Taylor and Barresi are clearer still. Reiterating Hanks's language, they note that the new "purpose," with respect to individual artists, "was to buy time for future creativity," and they link that policy directly to the debates centering on "lighght" (138-40). The simple distinction between a bureaucratic "now" and an artistic "future" that "lighght" inaugurated matters here. Future work is safer because it is supposed to be invisible. The problem with past work is that it is not only difficult to evaluate but virtually impossible to know how much of what kind of labor went into it and whether that labor can account for its qualities. The underwriting of "'projects' in mind," the act of "buy[ing] time for future creativity," and the pre-hoc evaluations those undertakings entail are exactly the types of speculative ventures that are *supposed* to be intangible and uncertain (Ardery 1, v-vi).

In emphasizing the increasingly precarious position of the art-worker engaged in intangible labor, Rep. John Brademas (D-Indiana), may have been the most perceptive governmental critic of the era. As a longtime advocate for federal support for the arts (who functioned as the House counterpart to Claiborne Pell [D-RI] in the Senate), Brademas responded dutifully to Scherle's attacks on Plimpton. In his direct responses, he marked those attacks as the political maneuvering they were, insisting plainly on distinguishing the government's role in "establish[ing] the conditions under which art can flourish" (in the words of former President John F. Kennedy, as quoted by Brademas on the record) from any role in aesthetic judgment: "I see little point to our taking time here to argue about the esthetic acceptability of individual works" (22129). Indirectly, though, in his defense of the need for increased expenditures in order to promote those "conditions," Brademas put his finger on the broader political import of Saroyan's poetics of deskilling. Just before turning his attention to Scherle's attacks, Brademas explains that the "evidence" of thirty-seven individual witnesses to the House Select Subcommittee on Education:

> showed plainly that the arts and humanities in this country are facing a stark financial crisis. … Costs of labor and materials have risen sharply, leaving a gap between expenditures and earned income that private philanthropy has been unable to fill. It must be recognized, as more than one witness noted, that more production to meet increased public demand in the arts almost invariably results in greater losses because labor-saving methods have little application in the arts. *There is no way to decrease the human effort in a work of art short of truncating the work itself*. And as the violinist Isaac Stern testified: "The higher the standards in the arts, the greater will be the deficits in production." (30 June 1970 22125, 22127, emphasis added)

Saroyan's truncating of his poems undoubtedly registers as a "decrease" in "human effort." The debates centered on that effect speak to the uncomfortable intangibility of even the kinds of labors that seem like they should be less mysterious than this. Saroyan's poems—with their insistent delinking of value from apparent skill and effort and the binary way in which some of them "click" and some of them do not—admit that the way labor produces or does not produce value is unavoidably dependent on more than the time, effort, and skill that can be understood to constitute that labor.

In doing so, however, "lighght" functions not as an extortion or "conspicuous manipulation" of its audience in the sense of demanding an unearned affirmation of aesthetic value (Fried, "How Modernism Works" 229n17). Its function is rather an egalitarian demand for the support necessary to make the production of such value possible in the context of "stark financial crisis" for intellectual (generally "unproductive") labor at a moment when (and this is a point Brademas is not in a position to make) a greater and greater proportion of the workforce is engaged in non-artistic and increasingly deskilled intellectual labor. Its commitment to acknowledging its own *dependence* rather than "self-sufficiency" is thus not a claim as to the role of the individual reader or beholder, whereby the audience helps "create" the meaning of the work; it is, instead, an insistence that the production of authentic artistic difference manifests in the middle of things and that such production may require different (or greater) means of support in different historical moments. "lighght" appears in the middle of the page and in the typewriter's Courier, and the poem's excess "gh" appears in the *middle* of the word. Each of these decisions (like the place-names highlighted at the front of many of Saroyan's small-press publications) serves as an acknowledgment of the dependent situation of independent, autonomous artistic labor: on media, technology, language (itself the product of more-or-less non-alienated, socialized labor), and habitable cities and rooms. If the exceedingly short poem strikes readers as a substantial "ask," requiring them to exert labors of intellection that they might prefer to find provided by the work itself, the *strength*—rather than the valence—of those reactions indexes the recognition that no single institution has the ability to adequately meet the needs to which the poem calls attention by way of its own excessive receding. Both the ecstatic "yes!" of the first reader of "eyeye" and the exasperated "The poem consists of only seven letters!" of Rep. Scherle implicitly recognize the maximal size of the demand for support for non-alienated labor that "lighght" makes visible.

6. "It Is Still a Rose": Governmental Literary Criticism in the Nineties

By the late 1980s, the battle over public funding for the arts and humanities had become a congressional tradition accompanying each new authorization bill for the NEA and NEH like triennial clockwork. If the contours of those debates remained predictable, by 1997 the stakes had increased. Fiscal conservatism had hardened into market-naturalizing neoliberalism over the course of Ronald Reagan's presidency. Proponents of that ideological position proved to be less interested in slowing the expansion of the Endowments than in advocating for their total elimination as a symbolic gesture in the direction of "small" government. The most widely publicized moments in the culture wars, as they pertained to the NEA, were skirmishes over the visual works of Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, and the "NEA Four" in 1989 and 1990, which led to the abolition of grants to individual artists—with the notable exception of writers. Individual NEA grants for authors of fiction and poetry continue to this day.

Saroyan's "lighght," meanwhile, had become a talking point in coterie publications like the Heritage Foundation's "Ten Good Reasons to Eliminate Funding for the National

Endowment for the Arts" (1997, authored by Laurence Jarvik) and the "Cultural Agencies" chapter of the Cato *Handbook for Congress, 105th Congress* (1997, "Prepared" by Sheldon Richman and David Boaz). Taking place in this context, debates on the floor of the Senate in 1997 represent the most extensive discussions of Saroyan's poem by public officials. Those debates were especially contentious because in the wake of the 1996 elections, Republicans held majorities in both houses. By July, the House had voted in favor of abolishing the NEA entirely and confiscating its $10 million in remaining assets. Although the Endowment had support from both President Clinton and a majority of the Senate, a group of Republican Senators made a push, in September, to follow through on the House's promise. Sen. John Ashcroft (R-Missouri) took the lead in this endeavor. On September 16, he gave a long speech during which he held aloft a printout of "lighght" and offered an interpretation of it as an attack on the dutifully employed, English-speaking American citizen:

> Now, this is the English version of the poem, I have to tell you. This is not the French or the German version. Maybe it *is* the German version of the poem. Maybe it is not the English version. This is it. This is why we would tax individuals, take money that they earned, working hard on their jobs, and we want to say to the rest of the world, this is what you should be doing…. I am sure getting this poem around to schoolchildren will inspire lots of them to be poets. I don't know whether this is a typographical error or whether this is profoundly insightful, but I don't think it is inspirational. I don't think we have to have the U.S. Government taking tax money from people who get up early and work hard all day and go home late, families with two parents working, one to pay the

Government, the other to support the family. I don't think we do that in order to be able to put a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval on this. (18852-53)

The implied narrative is familiar. Taxpayers "working hard on their jobs" are being scammed into subsidizing an uninspiring poet. Worse still, that poet is responsible for a potentially infectious "misspelling" and thus represents the shiftless artist more generally (17 Sept. 1997 19218). The following day, while brandishing the same mis-capitalized copy, Ashcroft explains that "Lighght" is a stand-in not merely for the wastefulness of federally funded social programs in the abstract but for all of the more explicitly obscene works previously funded by the NEA (see Fig. 17).

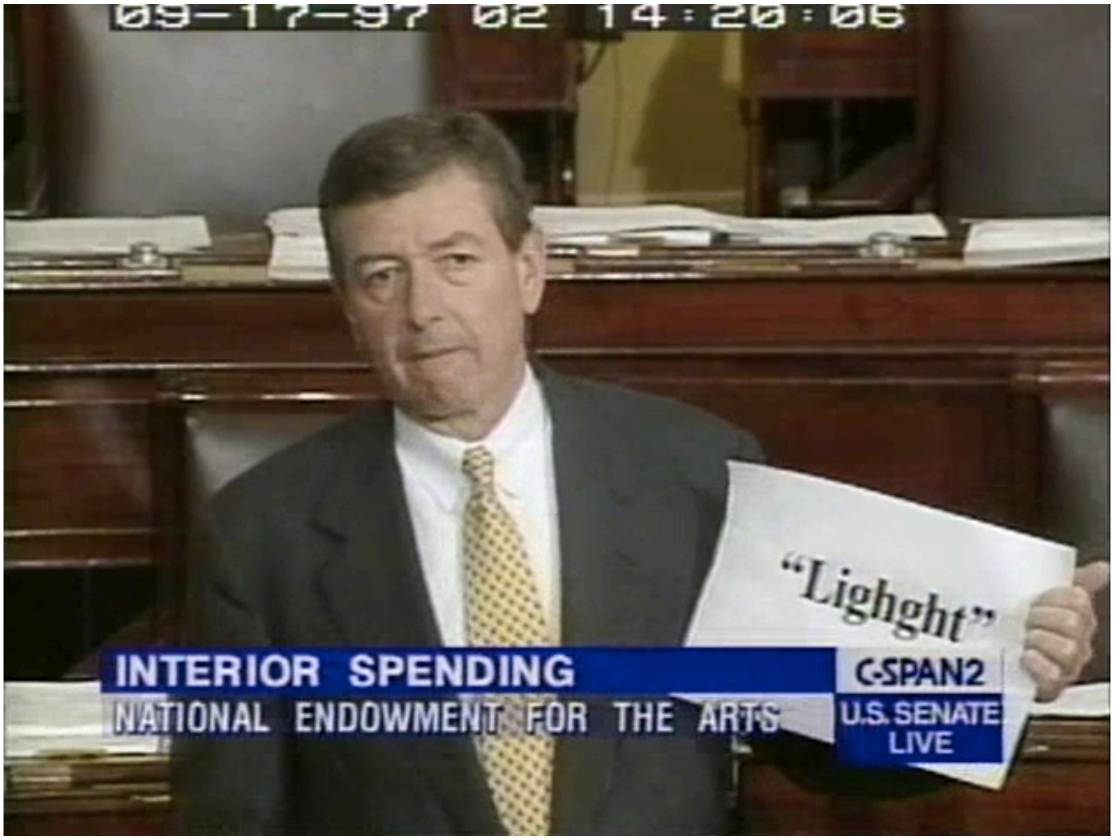
09-17-97 02 14:20:06
"Lighght"
INTERIOR SPENDING
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS
C-SPAN2
U.S. SENATE LIVE

Fig. 17. John Ashcroft, "Lighght," C-SPAN2, 17 Sept. 1997.

Those obscene works themselves, Ashcroft points out, “are not as easy to describe [as Saroyan’s poem], and … are not as suitable for television as the 30-year-old abuses are. Unfortunately, they are not as easy to use on television” (19222).[141] Later in the same speech, the Senator would go on to make the eminently “easy” poem’s thin materiality painfully visible by gradually affixing stickers to the piece of paper he is clutching, thus literalizing his “Seal of Approval” taunt. By way of this oratorical conversion, which presents scarcity as excessive and well-neigh pornographic, Ashcroft unwittingly reveals the complex flimsiness of the poem itself.

Subsequently, Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-California) responds not by countering Ashcroft’s literary values but by attempting to limit the poem’s metonymic reach. Attacking the extremity of Ashcroft’s proposal rather than its details, she gladly admits that the Endowment, like any institution, has erred and will err. Saroyan’s poem is a clear “mistake” that “doesn’t make much sense” (17 Sept. 1997 19291). That is no reason, Boxer insists, to do away with the NEA entirely, especially considering the more sensible multicultural and folkloric projects it has funded over the years, which are not only valuable in and of themselves but also have proved to be economically productive in many cases. She points to the reforms in the Endowment’s process of awarding grants as an argument for moderate change to, rather than the drastic dissolution of, a cheap and fiscally sound government “investment” (19291). Her defense, like Ashcroft’s attack, is grounded in the logic of the marketplace. Yet it is the amusing conclusion to Ashcroft’s own speech that is finally the most revealing in this respect:

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[141] Video of this portion of Ashcroft’s speech is available at http://bit.ly/govntlitcrit.

> An artistic statement, as a matter of fact, that came before the onset of the NEA, and will survive long after it, is that "A rose is nothing but a rose no matter what you call it, and by any other name, it is still a rose."
>
> With that in mind, I think it is time for us to say we have spent more than enough in subsidizing politically correct activities under the guise of promoting the arts.
>
> I reserve the balance of my time. (17 Sept. 1997 19219)

Ashcroft's contention that "lighght" represents a "politically correct" activity is of course ludicrous in the context of a discussion of a poem first published thirty years prior that, even in 1997, no one from either major party is willing to defend (with the partial exception of Sen. Tom Harkin [D-Iowa]). What I want to call attention to here, however, is the content and form of the Senator's colloquial and wonderfully awkward mash-up of Shakespeare's "That which we call a rose, / By any other name would smell as sweet" from *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) and Gertrude Stein's "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" from "Sacred Emily," a poem Stein wrote in 1913 and published in 1922 (395). The argumentative content of that likely unintentional and fully unattributed remark is straightforward: Things—even words—are what they are. For Shakespeare, the qualities of the referent of "rose" (such as sweetness) are unaffected by the name we give to that referent. For Ashcroft, by way of a misreading of Stein, even after an attempt to rename a thing ("what you call it") that thing remains locked into its true name: "it is *still* a *rose*." Ashcroft imbues his mash-up with the iambic rhythm of the classic American courtroom oath ("I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God"), which further underscores its speaker's commitment to realism. His testimony thus functions as a naturalization of the market, of hard work as identical to value, and of the self-sufficient endurance of the beautiful (“rose”), which will “survive long after” its phony competitors, most especially what Nixon calls the “little uglies” of modern art.[142]

The form of Ashcroft’s speech, meanwhile, replicates precisely the problem he claims to critique. He recycles and manipulates language without attribution, in effect using avant-garde techniques against the avant-garde in an attempt to generate controversy and further a policy goal that is nothing if not “politically correct”—according to a particular and thoroughly institutionalized political calculus. Ashcroft’s recyclings, after all, derive from coterie publications housed within well-funded libertarian think tanks. In “Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. 137: Subsidies to the Arts: Cultivating Mediocrity” (dated August 8, 1990), Bill Kauffman writes, “The NEA has been more patronizing than patron to the towns and villages of Middle America. An example: in 1969 NEA grantee George Plimpton … confounded observers by paying $1,500 for a poem by Aram Saroyan consisting of the single misspelled word, ‘lighght’” (8). In addition to getting his facts wrong (Saroyan received $500 and the *Chicago Review* received $250), Kauffman—despite a line biography describing himself as a “novelist”—simply regurgitates Scherle’s talking points. Seven years later, just prior to Ashcroft’s renewed attacks in 1997, Cato analysts reiterated the example. Arguing that Congress ought to “privatize the National Endowment for the Arts,” they mock Saroyan’s non-typo while reproducing the erroneous figure quoted by Kauffman: “Thanks to an NEA grantee, the American taxpayers once paid $1,500 for a poem, ‘lighght.’ That wasn’t the title or a typo. That was the entire poem” (*Handbook for Congress* 171, 172). The emphasis, in all such instances, is on the poem’s purported inability to survive unsubsidized in a nation understood as identical to “a thing called free enterprise.”

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[142] Earlier in the same speech, Ashcroft insists on the immutability of “great art” (as if that were the question under consideration): “The truth of the matter is you do not convert art into great art by putting some governmental seal of approval on it. It doesn’t change the character of it. … Well, I suppose people could say that we need the NEA so this sort of Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval could convert misspellings into great art and people would know how to invest their money. I hardly think so. I have to make that argument with my tongue in my cheek. I wonder how those who made the argument kept their tongue out of their cheek in that respect” (17 Sept. 1997 19218).

The ultimate logic behind this scheme of privatization is to undermine the metaphor at the heart of state support for the arts: that of nourishment. The examples of NEA successes championed by its advocates—whether in 1965, in the 1970s, or in the 1990s—highlight the geographic spread of the Endowment’s impact, the local groups and programs it has made possible, the results of its increased emphasis on circulating both art-objects and artists themselves throughout the country, especially to campuses, and the school-based organizations it has helped foster. More central even than this emphasis on democratic circulation is the language of cultivation or tending. In 1970, Sen. Pell (D-Rhode Island), future sponsor of the Pell Grant, distinguishes carefully between “a meddlesome, heavy hand” of government in the arts and a more sophisticated focus on “sustaining” and “unobtrusively… providing a climate” in which artists can “flourish naturally” (21 May 1970 16458). The adverb “naturally,” in this context, does not mean without assistance; rather, Pell’s point is precisely that “[c]ultural resources need to be protected and nurtured fully as much as other national resources” (16458). He is in part countering menacing Republican metaphors like “the dead hand of bureaucracy,” a synecdoche for the threat that a centralized “cultural czar” of the Soviet model would pose to the “free and untrammeled individual spirit” (30 June 1970 22128). More proactively, Pell makes clear that for himself and likeminded leaders the goal is to “provid[e]” an atmosphere in which artists and art organizations can thrive without relying wholly on either the marketplace or private munificence.

The most precise opposition to this formulation comes from a newspaper editorial (“Socializing the Arts”) cited in the House on June 30, 1970, the day the Nixon-era NEA funding increase passed over loud but insufficient objections. The anonymous editorialist for the

Indianapolis Star agrees that “[a] healthy civilization needs the arts, and the more the better,” but he or she then transmutes the “climate” metaphor: “it needs healthy arts thriving in a climate of freedom and originality and private initiative. The role of government should be confined to letting these flourish—and staying out of the way” (22124). Not against “flourish[ing]” per se, the writer cannot quite locate where it would come from, as evidenced by the lack of concrete agents in his or her phrasing: freedom, originality, and initiative are both the climate *and* “these” that flourish. This gap in logic allows only for self-creation and self-sufficiency by way of abstract virtues. More distinctly, the editorialist’s emphasis on “staying out” and “letting [be]” suggests that the real opposite of a nurtured and nurturing atmosphere is the *laissez-faire* vacuum of the marketplace. The goal of the rhetoric on offer from the early 1970s through the late 1990s—from Scherle, Cato, Ashcroft, and others—is to replace the former with the latter.

These two core images—of climate and vacuum—likewise present two possible visions of what is allegorized by the nearly blank page. In the context of the debates those images and visions inform, it would be a mistake, however small, to dismiss Saroyan’s poem’s episodic appearance and reappearance before Congress as a quirk of history; a testament to the dull cultural moderateness of American politicians; or a fortuitous line in the author’s biography. In their cynical preference for an invisible page, the critics of “lighght” recognized its real meaning to be a rebuke of the unsupportive marketplace. Meanwhile, to its reluctant apologists, the circulating poem—by tensing the relays between work and ease—made perhaps too palpable the size of the task of providing a robust climate of support for media and art of all kinds, however thin.

Curiously, informed professional discussions of minimalism tend to reproduce certain predilections on display in the lay treatments by Congress. Both expert critics and expert defenders of minimalist literary texts generally sense but fail to address the allegorical meaning of such texts as demands for support (demands which are activated by the ways in which such texts emphasize their own proximity to non-artistic production). For example, Ashcroft's inexpert line of argument foreshadows an important recent attempt to apply Fried's defense of mainstream artistic modernism (and his corresponding critique of minimalism) to the field of American poetry. Recall, this time with a different emphasis, the claim quoted previously from Ashton in her conclusion to *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945*:

> First-Decade poetry … enables us to see the entire post-1945 era of American poetic production as an era *distinctively committed to building a literary art around the value of self-expression*. That is, not only lyric poetry understood as such, but even explicitly anti-lyric poetics such as those of the Language movement or, more recently, of a resurgent conceptualism that claims to be "against expression" are equally committed to the valued representation of subjectivity, if not of "self." (216-17, emphasis added)

This forceful claim relies heavily on Fried's arguments about visual art. Ashton positions the various mid-century poetry scenes, including those that self-position as avant-garde, as enacting in print something like the lyric misadventure into "experience" and "literalism" that Fried sees visual artists pursuing around the same moment. "Minimalism in art and Language writing in poetry," Ashton continues, "staged this conviction most vividly with their insistence that the reader/beholder is as responsible for producing the art as the artist him- or herself" (227). That theatrical "insistence" comes, for Ashton, at the expense of "the autonomy of the work of art" (227). The critic thus dispenses readily with "sixty-five years" of poetry by dismissing it as too eagerly dependent.

One of the few writers from that period whom Ashton mentions by name is the Language poet Ron Silliman. Silliman, as mentioned toward the outset of this chapter, awarded Saroyan's *Complete Minimal Poems* a major prize in 2008, and in his one-page preface to the book's second edition he offers a generous and convincing description of the work Saroyan produced during the postwar period that Ashton views through her censorious "lyric goggles" (218). Yet in his effort to underscore the value of Saroyan's poems and to avoid falling into the trap of positioning them as conditional on the "experience" of the "reader/beholder," Silliman implicitly accedes to some of Ashton's framing: "Reading *Complete Minimal Poems*, we are struck by just how *sturdy* these poems have proven to be and just how brightly Saroyan's sense of humor shines through these pages. These poems are works of great optimism and are as *radical and strong* as the day they were written" (7, emphasis added). I agree with Silliman's sense of the "great optimism" of Saroyan-style minimalism, but his description of it as "strong" and "sturdy" strikes me as overlooking its most significant quality. The ability of "lighght" to survive multiple runs through the wringers of the House and Senate testifies to some measure of endurance and fecundity, no doubt. But the radicalness of poems such as "lighght" and "a man stands" is fully bound up with the sense of softness or weakness they brightly explore. In numerous ways, they acknowledge and even insist upon not their sturdiness but their dependency; that dependence, however, is *not* upon the reactions or productive capacity of the "reader/beholder," as Ashton would have it, but on the means of production and circulation that Saroyan's tiny poems take fully into account as prior and proximate to the artistic labor of their making.

The simplest recognition of that understanding of Saroyan's minimalism as emphatically reliant appears on the copyright page of *Complete Minimal Poems*: "The first edition was published by Ugly Duckling Presse in its Lost Literature Series with the support of the National Endowment for the Arts" (n.p.). A few lines down, a repetition underscores the deep-seatedness of this funding model: "Ugly Duckling Presse is a 501(c)(3) non-profit publisher supported by the New York State Council of the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York City Department for Cultural Affairs" (n.p.). These familiar acknowledgments of state and federal "support" rhyme with Saroyan's own insistence on a dependence that extends far beyond the singular "reader/beholder" who might find joy, confusion, or mere extortion in the poems themselves. To the extent that the poet's work, in baffling Representatives and Senators over the years, accelerated the NEA's move toward funding "future creativity" and small institutions—including UDP itself, that purveyor of "little uglies"—it stands for the wide distribution of resources within the field of cultural production and allegorizes redistribution more generally. The "insistence" enacted by the weakness of "lighght" is not on the reader or viewer's participation but on the ubiquity of dependence, the hoax of self-sufficiency, and the decency of support. It is an insistence, too, for more such support for all subjects and all cultural endeavors.

Saroyan himself never speaks of his very short poems in quite these terms, but they are implicit in his commentary on his father's far more famous short stories. Interrogating William Saroyan's pop-modernism, the younger Saroyan writes,

> Having perceived America to be an economy rather than a genuine culture, [William] Saroyan set about being an artist in a manner that might most deeply engage and interest a broad section of the population of such a society. He did not, either implicitly or

> explicitly, undertake an authentic critique of that society in the interests of making it more genuine and more human. (*William Saroyan* 33)

The elder Saroyan's most famous production, "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze," may well be the unrecognized source of the "safety net" metaphor we still use to describe broad-based structures of social support. It resonates, in any case, with the New Deal policies being implemented in the mid-1930s as William Saroyan was taking flight as an author and public figure. But it did not begin appearing until the 1950s, and it was not popularized until Reagan began using it, in the early 1980s, to *distinguish* those who merit such security from those who supposedly do not. In explicitly presenting his notoriously productive father as fundamentally an individualist and "an apologist for the American Dream," the younger Saroyan implicitly positions his own soft minimalism as an optimistic critique of that Dream's privileging of self-sufficiency over and against the kind of broadly distributed support that might make possible a "genuine culture" (39).

The final entry collected in *Complete Minimal Poems* captures, in a tone of flat appreciation, not only the big politics but the small intimacy of that vision. Printed to reproduce or suggest the author's handwriting rather than his typewriter, it serves as a personal bookend that balances the front-end acknowledgments of public assistance: "Gailyn is doing the dishes" (277). Saroyan's five-word, one-sentence poem (first printed in 1971) gives form to sheer gratitude by recognizing its own existence as made possible by the off-page domestic labor it describes. That same poem also effectively concluded Saroyan's career as a minimalist and avant-gardist; after 1972, he would publish primarily long-form prose and conspicuously "regular" poetry.[143] His career as an artistic innovator, then, runs almost precisely from the birth of the NEA in 1965 to Watergate in 1973.

The central meaning of the poet's radical output from that interval is plainest when we consider the unambiguously political criticism it elicited alongside the informed, professional arguments from and about the same era. That output, elegantly enclosed in *Complete Minimal Poems*, does not refuse absolutely the kinds of demands that its lay audience (of politicians) would make on it; embodying a different kind of effort than hand labor, it takes if not great pains then small ones, over and over, to allow for its own dependency—on everything from the medium of the page to the care provided by one's family. It thus refuses the traditional "autonomy of the work of art" expressly advocated by Ashton and Fried, latent in certain of Silliman's adjectives, and enacted by Saroyan's father. Crucially, however, the limits of the artwork's self-sufficiency, as understood by Saroyan, are not set by the reader or consumer as Congress would prefer. His poems do not cater to a potential audience in order to promote their own economic viability. They epitomize neither the total *artistic autonomy* privileged by anti-minimalist critics *nor* the market-applicable *economic independence* privileged by governmental ones. Rather, by way of extreme brevity and variably laborious intellectual labor and in an attempt to undertake "an authentic critique," they pursue a kind of *artistic semi-autonomy*. Their critique foregrounds the similarities between high valuations of hard economic and hard poetic labor. They highlight the latter's proximity to and embeddedness within the former in order to give shape to a utopian demand for a dramatic extension of supportive infrastructure.

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[143] Saroyan explicitly dates the end of his avant-gardism and his turn to poetic realism to the event of finding purpose and support in family: "When I started to write again, in the late summer of 1972 in Bolinas, California, it wasn't minimal poetry anymore, but a long poem about my life, marriage, and fatherhood. Strawberry Saroyan, our older daughter, had been born at the hospital in Stoneham, Massachusetts on October 20, 1970, which is probably the most accurate date I could give for the end of *my* Sixties" ("My Sixties" 33).

Minimalism, at least as its manifests in Saroyan's poetry, thus anticipates a world that would make available to all comers not expression or perception but truly autonomous labor.

CODA

Brevity's Wake

In these final pages, rather than recapitulating the claims of the relatively independent case studies that constitute the previous three chapters, I want to call attention to a few of the patterns that emerge across them. What commonalities obtain in the literary histories of Ezra Pound's "In a Station of a Metro," Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool," and Aram Saroyan's "lighght"? What do we gain by considering those histories alongside one another?

Most generally, the central position occupied by concerns with verbal economy and discrete units (of line, phrase, and grapheme) in the early poetry of the three authors examined in this project clarifies the way in which shortness functions as a *shared poetic resourc*e linking otherwise disparate practitioners to a broad tradition. In "The Poetic Principle" (1850), an essay published the year after his death, Edgar Allan Poe argued explicitly for this understanding of the artform he cherished most. He foregrounds "those minor English or American poems which… have left the most definite impression" on his imagination, noting that "[b]y 'minor poems' I mean, of course, poems of little length" (1431). What begins as a statement of personal preference for the "little" quickly expands into a pair of sweeping declarations:

> I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, "a long poem," is simply a flat contradiction in terms. … On the other hand, it is clear that a poem may be improperly brief. Undue brevity degenerates into mere epigrammatism. A *very* short poem, while now and then producing a brilliant or vivid, never produces a profound or

> enduring effect. There must be the steady pressing down of the stamp upon the wax. (1431, 1433)

None of three twentieth-century writers I have considered would assent to Poe's absolutist understanding of the "long poem" as a pure contradiction or outright impossibility. All three would in fact go on to produce their longest works only after authoring their most popular single poems, in each case a "*very* short" one. Nor would they, then, affirm the qualification embedded in Poe's dismissal of "[u]ndue brevity." Yet their willingness to explore and implicitly debate the consequences of linguistic economization makes them apprehensible to Poe's spectrum, even as they put pressure on both of its poles. A sincere commitment to reduction and concentration, that is, connects authors such as Pound, Brooks, and Saroyan not to "the essentiality of what we call Poetry" but to a long line of other authors and a set of verbal practices up for constant renegotiation (Poe 1433).[144] The act of engaging with issues of reduction, even when it takes place by way of historically and conceptually distinct "discourses of brevity," thus serves to unite writers whom otherwise might be seen to have little to say to one another. Such engagements foreground textual brevity as a core site of contestation within the field of modern poetry, however we elect to define that field.

More specifically, the three particular poems I consider serve as crucial evidence in the ongoing reassessment of literary modernism's relationship to popular culture. That reassessment most often takes place by locating popular or non-literary elements within the textural fabric of decidedly difficult works of art, but very short poems flip that familiar dynamic. If Pound, Brooks, and Saroyan can all be understood to partake in the project of developing and redefining modernist poetics, the textual biographies of their most famous works undermine any clean distinctions between a commitment to formal innovation and wide readership. The indisputably public lives that "Metro," "Cool," and "lighght" continue to live call attention to the way in which certain works in the modernist tradition—however reticent or formally peculiar—have had and continue to find a wide range of readers and users. Taking seriously the variety and strangeness of those lives means refusing to position a cultural studies approach to literary production as antithetical to the output of High Modernists, canonical American poets, or the poetic avant-garde. The social function of shortness means that even the most self-consciously artistic "minor" poem has considerable potential to disseminate in unpredictable ways. Though first published in small magazines specializing in poetry, "Metro," "Cool," and "lighght" have grown into American micro-classics by finding countless audiences and homes well beyond the bounds of restricted circulation. They are exemplary instances of what we might term "circulatory modernism."

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[144] The Bolivian-born Swiss-German concrete poet Eugen Gomringer updates the central idea of Poe's essay for a highly mediated twentieth-century international context when he writes, in "From Line to Constellation" (1954), "Restriction in the best sense—concentration and simplification—is *the very essence of poetry*. From this we ought perhaps to conclude that the language of today," with its abbreviations, acronyms, headlines, and slogans, "must have certain things in common with poetry, and that they should sustain each other both in form and substance" (Solt 67, emphasis added).

The most unexpected and refreshing similarity in the histories of these three poems is the extent to which their myriad readers have done far more than just encounter them. The record reveals that audiences have repeatedly been tempted not merely to interpret these texts or reproduce them verbatim but to engage with them at the level of the material particulars of their forms and formatting. All three poems have been remediated numerous times, in film, television, and song, and are continuously undergoing new permutations online. All three have been turned into posters. And all three have sparked direct rewritings at the level of the word or line—manifesting not only as parodies but replies, erroneous reproductions, and all manner of reworkings. At some level, this is simply how we read: we approach, copy, tweak, and rewrite in order to understand a text, to learn about its construction, to see what it can and cannot withstand. Exceedingly short poems, however, are especially apt to induce these kinds of engagement. Upon being relinquished into the word by its maker, the short poem often strikes us as both "closed" or finished and unrepentantly deficient. As a result, professional critics (like M. H. Abrams), poets (like Terrance Hayes), and lay readers of all kinds (including John Ashcroft) are tempted not only to read but test and alter short works. The small size of such texts makes hands-on engagement seem simultaneously compulsory and possible, even easy at times.

The dynamic by which the small text elicits engagement is taxonomically useful to the extent that it upends any straightforward distinction between "open" and "closed" forms. The very short work simultaneously appears utterly complete and unusually amenable to alteration. In a related fashion, that same dynamic is analytically useful inasmuch as it interrupts any uncomplicated associations we might have between readerly engagement and designations like "subjective" or "interactive." As we saw in Chapter 3, critics can be quick to associate these terms for argumentative purposes. Jennifer Ashton, for instance, contends that "it has been a hallmark of the art and poetry that followed modernism—namely, of postmodernism—that they have repudiated claims to the autonomy of the work of art precisely by insisting on the reader/beholder's *necessity* to the work of art" ("Poetry of the Twenty-First Century" 227). The literary histories presented in the three chapters above push back against such claims. The kinds of productive, writerly, and quasi-mechanical interactions induced in readers by very brief works such as "Metro," "Cool," and "lighght" do not in any substantial way point toward the "*necessity*" of those readers, as emphasized by Ashton, or toward a prioritization of "the subjectivity of the poet on the one hand and the reader on the other" (217). Rather than occupying a position of creative necessity or one of subjective imposition, readers who engage with short texts by altering or rewriting them often seem to literalize the term “beholder.” The works to which they respond are not merely seen, observed, or contemplated; they are taken in hand (even as that “hand” itself is augmented and mediated). Readers/beholders, to borrow Ashton’s fused term, take hold of very short poems not to remake the forms of those poems themselves but to try on the act of making and to learn something about the “originals.” Meanwhile, through such iterative encounters, such poems are held in the cultural firmament.

The most skeptical, least sanguine reply to such direct or literal engagements by beholders, readers, and users would position them as simple deprecations, mis-readings, or misuses of properly aesthetic artifacts. From such a perspective, the quirky afterlives of poems like “Metro,” “Cool,” and “lighght” look like little more than evidence of dilution or cooptation. Certainly, any reuse or repurposing of an art-object risks hubris or egocentrism, particularly if the later reader-user is insufficiently occupied by the text’s extant meanings and the circumstances of its making. Yet all three poems examined in this study, by approaching but not quite reaching the zero-limit of the blank page or the no-word poem, in fact actively court such threats to their artistry. If Poe both centers and places a limit on poetic brevity, Pound, Brooks, and Saroyan all in different ways stretch that limit without quite negating it. They do so, moreover, by courting precisely the threat that Poe identifies: transformation into a specific, preexisting genre. If for Poe the genre that poses the most risk to the poem of “[u]ndue brevity” is the epigram, “Metro,” “Cool,” and “lighght” each approach a different kind of doppelgänger genre. Saroyan, for instance, overtly brings his minimal poems, and “lighght” in particular, into relation with the unintended error or typo. The microgenre of the linguistic techno-accident underscores the significance of knowledge-work and intentionality to his poetry. In “We Real

Cool," Brooks likewise activates a common or popular genre of brevity—the jingle—in order to produce a work of art with the potential to reach a wide range of readers, even as it fends off its own song-like qualities by way of severe line breaks. And Pound, in spite of his conscious intentions, produces a poem that might be read as mere decoration, ornament, or kitsch, even as its missing elements situate it at the edge of or beyond such categories. While each of these three poems courts a different alter-genre, they all do so in a manner that seems to prefigure or predict any potential mis-readings or misuses they might suffer.

Concurrently, such very short poems resist being solely or easily used. Even as they are revisited, rewritten, and posterized, they seem to remain fundamentally themselves. "lighght," for instance, is battered about by Congress. It is denigrated, capitalized, presented on a sad piece of printer paper, and affixed with a sticker (as a mock Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval). It gives rise to countless over-easy puns and parodies, and yet it somehow endures. During a subcommittee discussion of arts funding in 1975, for example, Clarence Long (D-MD) re-raises the issue of Saroyan's by then famously brief poem having received a government-sponsored award. After a bit of back-and-forth, Long elects to drop his performatively populist complaint, and in doing so he concedes that "lighght" has something unforgettable, even unchangeable, about it: "I will say this for it; it is one of the few poems I can remember" ("Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Hearing" 717). The skeptical politician's admission serves as an apt recognition of the frail resilience of Saroyan's form.

This peculiar kind of endurance-within-change suggests one final point: Short texts are ideal sites for recognizing the dual imperatives of literary history. On the one hand, we are often tempted to describe the origin of a text—its moment of making, its initial space of circulation, its first audiences and their reactions—to such an exacting degree that our work may be taken as an affirmation of textual originalism. By this logic, the work of literature means what it meant in its own time and reconstituting that meaning is our overriding purpose as scholars. On the other hand, we may be inclined to pursue the various drafts, iterations, and recyclings of a text in a manner that, at its extreme, entails a commitment to unrestrained anti-essentialism. The dynamic histories of poems such as "Metro," "Cool," and "lighght" attest that this opposition need not be understood as a choice or polarity. They retain clear traces of their making even as they circulate and shift.

The formulation Poe offers at the end of the epigraph above provides a helpful clue here; it proposes a way to clarify the crux where textual originalism meets textual relativism. His insistence that "[t]here must be the steady pressing down of the stamp upon the wax" captures something of how the moment or process of making seems to endure and carry forward in poems such as the ones we have examined. Certain aspects of Poe's description are bound up with his sense of scale, with American Romanticism, and with nineteenth-century media technologies. He emphasizes a measure of extension, in opposition to extreme brevity; the individual reader's subjective experience of the poem, rather than its incorporation into history; and a media metaphor very much of its time.[145] Yet his subtle sense of how the art of making verbal art (i.e. poetics) is bound up with the way such art *continues* to make an impression in time, even as it circulates in unforeseeable ways, neatly captures a crucial aspect of the "*very* short poem." The equivocal made-ness of the poem, which brevity cannot help but foreground, remains central to its afterlives, no matter how diffuse or distant. "Metro," "Cool," and "lighght" thus affirm and complicate Poe's formulation. They suggest that it is not simply the firm and unabating "pressing down" but an especially fine tensing of work and ease that accounts for their enduring fascination. Each of them balances a quality of made-ness against one of being not quite (made) enough. Each in its own way articulates the juncture where a work's artifice meets the act of its being relinquished into the world, beyond the sway of its maker.

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[145] Poe contends that "a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites," and since "psychal necessity" precludes such excitement from being "sustained" indefinitely, a given poem should take no more than "the lapse of half an hour" to read (1431).

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