

THE AMERICAN AVANT-PASTORAL: EZRA POUND, LOUIS ZUKOFSKY,  
RONALD JOHNSON

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Since the time of Virgil, poets have dreamed of Arcadia: an imaginary rural landscape in which poet-shepherds while away their days with song, enjoying a non-exploitative relation to nature, to each other, and to their own inmost selves. These fantasies are created in the shadow of an imperial urban power defined by the administration and exploitation of these natural, social, and psychological resources. In the twentieth century the pastoral fantasy took on new urgency in the face of rapid industrialization and globalization; however, the pastoral gestures most common in modern and contemporary American poetry tend toward the naive reification of nature as an object for aesthetic consumption. This dissertation examines how three American modernist poets use the avant-garde technique of collage to revive the negative and critical capacity of pastoral and transform it into a vehicle for utopian speculation. The avant-pastoral mode is that of the bricoleur, reassembling the linguistic and natural givens of a world damaged by instrumental logic and industrial exploitation into new configurations in which writers and readers might dwell. As modernist “ecoleurs,” these poets write pastorals that suggest critical alternatives both to the willed naiveté of the “nature poem” and to the epic “poem including history,” seeking to uncover the liberatory potential of the pastoral landscape by steering poetic language between the Scylla of myth and the Charybdis of instrumental reason.

Chapter 1 reads Adorno and Heidegger as modernist thinkers about pastoral, a mode whose apparent weakness as an aesthetic of wishful thinking manifests as

critical potential when it is combined with avant-garde techniques and imperatives. Chapter 2 examines the changing role of pastoral in *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound as it shifts from a vehicle for fascist ideology to something more tentative, fragile, and open in the *Pisan Cantos*. Chapter 3 considers the urban pastoral of Louis Zukofsky, whose bricolagic approach to language and the natural world suggests an attempt at a utopian ecology. Chapter 4 studies the work of Ronald Johnson and the persistence of the utopian-critical impulse in his ecstatic pastoral epic, *ARK*, a poem that turns Pound on his head through its attempts to exclude history.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Joshua Corey was born in Manhattan and grew up in northern New Jersey. He received his B.A. from Vassar College and went on to earn an M.A. in English literature and an M.F.A. in creative writing (poetry) at The University of Montana. For two years he was a Stegner Fellow in Poetry at Stanford University before moving to Ithaca, where he completed his Ph.D. in English Language and Literature at Cornell in December 2007. During his time at Cornell Corey published two full-length books of poetry: *Selah* (Barrow Street Press, 2003) and *Fourier Series* (Spineless Books, 2005), and two chapbooks: *Compos(t)ition Marble* (Pavement Saw Press, 2006) and *Hope & Anchor* (Noemi Press, 2007). He also maintains a weblog, *Cahiers de Corey*, at <http://joshcorey.blogspot.com>.

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For Emily, of course, and for Sadie Gray.

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## Introduction

### Pastoral, Modernism, and the Avant-Garde

This dissertation began with my curiosity about the oxymoronic phrase “modernist pastoral.” Pastoral is a genre known for its nostalgia, its yearning for an imaginary past in which human beings inhabit a gracious “middle landscape”<sup>1</sup> between nature and civilization, taking the best of both while being spared either’s deprivations and depredations. The practice of modernist poets, on the other hand, is oriented toward the cultural fragmentation characteristic of modernity, and the historical avant-gardes of the twentieth century are particularly defined by their response to the technologies of modernity—their threat to tradition, their promise of utopia. In his book *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Andrea Huyssen claims that “technology played a crucial, if not *the* crucial, role in the avantgarde’s attempt to overcome the art/life dichotomy and make art productive in the transformation of everyday life”:

I would go further: no other single factor has influenced the emergence of the new avantgarde art as much as technology, which not only fueled the artists’ imagination (dynamism, machine cult, beauty of technics, constructivist and productivist attitudes), but penetrated to the core of the work itself. The invasion of the very fabric of the art object by technology and what one may loosely call the technological imagination can best be grasped in artistic practices such as collage, assemblage, montage, and photomontage; it finds its ultimate fulfillment in photography and film, art forms which can not only be

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase comes from Leo Marx’s book *The Machine in the Garden*; for more on this concept see Chapter One, below.

reproduced, but are in fact designed for mechanical reproducibility. (9,  
italics in original)

But in the context of twentieth-century American poetry the poets we are used to thinking of as “pastoral” are proportionally distant from the avant-garde, not only in the latter’s preoccupation with technology, but in their willed distance from its artistic practices, the techniques of collage that figure so prominently in the poetry of Ezra Pound and his followers. Poets like Robert Frost, Robinson Jeffers, Wendell Berry, and Mary Oliver are commonly cited examples of this strain of pastoralism. They are considered pastoral poets because they write poems preoccupied by the rhythms of agriculture, or the spectacle of a landscape whose beauty is enhanced by its indifference to human values, or with the more or less explicit rejection of Western modernity and the urban in favor of values derived from native traditions (Frost’s New England), Jeffersonian agrarianism (Berry), or a kind of pagan pantheism, whether bleak (Jeffers) or cheerful (Oliver) in affect. But there is a formal dimension, too: these poets are praised for a pastoralism that stems from their use of a language that is felt to be somehow mimetic of the natural, using either the slightly elevated Wordsworthian speech of “a man speaking to men” or else the vernacular language that Marianne Moore called “plain American which cats and dogs can read.” Collage, fragmentation, and intertextuality are seen as foreign to the spirit of a poetry intended to provide the least obstructive possible mediation between human beings and nature—or in the case of Jeffers, to strongly de-center the human in favor of nature. The rejection of avant-garde artistic practices seems endemic if not intrinsic to this version of twentieth-century pastoral’s critique of modernity.

The above is not meant to be conclusive about the particular poets mentioned; it is only a sketch of what I take to be the conventional wisdom about American pastoral poetry of the twentieth century. Indeed, pastoral itself has never been

adequately defined: at one end it has received the vague and vaguely formalist definition as a technique for “putting the complex into the simple” (Empson) while at the other it has been seen as a question of subject matter—writing about the virtues of the country as opposed to the sinful and corrupt city (a genuinely Virgilian sentiment explored and exploded by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*) or even writing strictly concerned with the lives of herdsmen (the answer to the eponymous question of Paul Alpers’ study, *What Is Pastoral?*). It seems that a purely formalist definition of pastoral such as Empson hints at will be as inadequate as one solely prescriptive of content, however general or specific: a text about shepherds, about the proletariat, about nature, etc. What is therefore needed is less a prescriptive definition of either form or content than the historicized description of a mode with a particular function within the larger context of twentieth-century avant-garde poetry. To do this requires us to look at what is most generally at stake in such poetry: the confrontation with technological modernity as it manifests under American capitalism. If traditional pastoralists such as Frost turn their backs on this modernity (nonetheless registering its alienating force through their attempts to recover subjectivity through contact with nature), the avant-pastoralists I will be concerned with have responded with Rimabud’s “Il faut être absolument moderne.” At the same time they are as concerned as the traditionalists to forcefully criticize and contest the malign effects of technological capitalism: the reification, commodification, and destruction of human and external nature. They are partly distinguished from the traditionalists by their ambivalence toward the destruction of such nineteenth-century essences as use-value, the aura of artworks, and the bourgeois subject that are some of the second-order effects of capitalism: the traditionalists seek straightforwardly to recuperate these while the avant-garde writers question both the possibility and the desirability of such

essences. Their nostalgia has a critical dimension immanent to their usage of avant-garde forms—in particular, the form of collage.

For the twentieth-century pastoral traditionalists the autonomy of the artwork—or the artwork as autonomous aesthetic environment—is still seen as desirable and achievable. The Arcadian space of pastoral provides a refuge from the depredations of a technologized reality that demands both the repression of libido (the instrumentalization of inner nature) and the exploitation of nature (both internal and external: one's own body is as convertible into "human capital" as a forest can be rendered into "natural resources"). The pressure put upon human life by nature—manifested most elegantly in the phrase "et in Arcadia ego"<sup>2</sup>—tends to be the more palpable element of traditionalist pastoral. The pressures of capitalist, social reality are most often simply elided. In such a poem technological capitalism is only negatively present, rendering it a purely "lyric" poetry in the sense described by Theodor Adorno in his essay, "On Lyric Poetry and Society":

You experience lyric poetry as something opposed to society, something wholly individual. Your feelings insist that it remain so, that lyric expression, having escaped from the weight of material existence, evoke the image of a life free from the coercion of reigning practices, of utility, of the relentless pressures of self-preservation. This demand, however, the demand that the lyric word be virginal, is itself social in nature. It implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive, and this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work: the more heavily

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<sup>2</sup> "I hold sway, even in Arcadia"—a phrase attributed to Death in Erwin Panofsky's famous essay "Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," in his *Meaning and the Visual Arts* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955): 295-320.

the situation weighs upon it, the more firmly the work resists it by refusing to submit to anything heteronomous and constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws. The work's distance from mere existence becomes the measure of what is false and bad in the latter. In its protest the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different. ("Lyric Poetry" 39-40)

While it is possible for a critic to dialectically extract the truth content that Adorno sees in the lyric poem from a traditional pastoral poem, such work is prey to the paradox described by Herbert Marcuse in "The Affirmative Character of Culture": by presenting a positive image of self-recovery in nature, the energy of the traditional pastoral poem's protest gets dissipated by the imaginary satisfactions it offers. Furthermore, the traditional pastoral poem is "organic" in Peter Bürger's sense of the word: by adapting traditional verse forms (which by mid-century certainly include free verse) the poet subordinates the poem's individual components (both formal components such as rhymes and content components like objects and incidents) to its overall form, its "poemness": "In the organic work of art, the political and moral contents the author wishes to express are necessarily subordinated to the organicity of the whole. This means that whether the author wants to or not, they become parts of the whole, to whose constitution they contribute" (89). As an organic artwork the well-made pastoral poem seeks "to make unrecognizable the fact that it has been made" (72); it imitates nature or a "natural" reaction to nature. However forceful the protest of an organic poem, it becomes a necessarily false image of reconciliation by virtue of its form: "The man-made organic work of art that pretends to be like nature projects an image of the reconciliation of man and nature" (78). Contrasted with this is the technologized "non-organic" artwork of the avant-garde, which refuses reconciliation and attempts instead to compose itself out of immediate fragments of reality:

According to Adorno, it is the characteristic of the non-organic work using the principle of montage that it no longer creates the semblance (*Schein*) of reconciliation.... The insertion of reality fragments into the work of art fundamentally transforms that work. The artist not only renounces shaping a whole, but gives the painting a different status, since parts of it no longer have the relationship to reality characteristic of the organic work of art. They are no longer signs pointing to reality, they *are* reality. (78, italics in original)

Certainly plastic arts that incorporate materials that refer only to themselves (and the history of their prior usage) are more likely to achieve what we might call “the reality effect” than literary texts, which, as T.S. Eliot’s Sweeney would say, “gotta use words” that inevitably act more as “signs pointing to reality” than tokens of the real. And Bürger himself expresses pessimism as to whether non-organic artworks can achieve the protest against reconciliation in any meaningful political way, noting that “It is fundamentally problematical to assign a fixed meaning to a procedure” (78)—though he does allow for historicizing approaches such as those of Ernst Bloch, who “distinguishes between montage in late capitalism and montage in a socialist society” (79). Still, the use of words like “organic” and “non-organic” are suggestive in the context of an Adornian aesthetics that seeks at once to propose “the reconciliation of man and nature” as the goal of art and to declare such reconciliation impossible and any portrayal of it a lie for as long as utopia has not been achieved in the political and economic realms—that is, in reality. For Adorno, the only legitimate representation of utopia by an artwork is a negative one, so that he must reject the aesthetic theories of other Marxist thinkers like Sartre’s engaged literature or the realism of “types” advocated by Lukács. For Adorno, art is determined by what lies outside it: it is Leibniz’s monad, windowless yet through a kind of metonymy

containing within itself the image of the administered world: “every simple substance has relations which express all the others and [the monad] is consequently a perpetual living mirror of the universe” (Leibniz 79). It is these “relations which express all the others” which Adorno understands as a principle of movement for the artwork, which emerges from and stands opposed to the conditions of an unendurable reality:

Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not. The specifically artistic in art must be derived concretely from its other; that alone would fulfill the demands of a materialistic-dialectical aesthetics. Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form. It exists only in relation to its other; it is the process that transpires with its other. (AT 3)

The artwork must be negative if it is to have any critical power or truth content (*Warheitgehalt*). This means that it cannot posit an image of bliss—its utopia must never be *represented*. The advanced artwork regards the world from a utopian position, but that position cannot itself be represented without a false reconciliation with the world as it is:

*Finale* – The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the word, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence,

entirely from felt contact with its objects—this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but it is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape. (MM 247)

Though the reconciliation between man and nature is the ultimate goal of art (or in Hegelian terms, the goal of Spirit whose fullest achievement means the withering of art), its image must be permanently deferred according to Adorno's aesthetics—a deferral enabled in part by the artwork's refusal of "organic" wholeness. Only the inorganic artwork, which seeks through fragmentation and at the cost of fragmentation to achieve that "hair's breadth" distance from the materials from which it is composed, can achieve the perspective of "the messianic light" which it necessarily refrains from representing directly. If the pastoral artwork is that which provides a semblance of reconciliation, then for Adorno the light shed by such an image only serves to perpetuate the darkness. The organically structured "lyric poetry" Adorno describes in his essay succeeds by refusing to represent an unacceptable reality and fails insofar as it can be recuperated as an object for consumption that compensates for that reality. The inorganic artwork, by contrast, as a product of Huyssen's "technological imagination," may be accused of attempting to directly reconcile human beings with the industrial modernity that has brought about a Benjaminian "historical change in sensory perception" (Huyssen 14). Susan Buck-

Morss describes the work of the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s in this way: “The art of the Russian avant-garde prided itself in being ‘nonobjective’ and was accused by its enemies of being ‘formalist,’ but it remained representational in the important sense that it was mimetic of the experience of modernity. Precisely through abstraction, the artworks gave expression to a human sensorium fundamentally altered by the tempos and technologies of factory and urban life” (63). Such a move seemed plausible for the Russian avant-garde, artists who actively sought to accelerate the pace of history toward a technological and socialist utopia. As Buck-Morss shows, after a brief flourishing they were suppressed by Stalin, their work condemned as a dangerous distraction from a process of socialist modernization ironically indebted to Western modes of production, so that their work could not help but be organized around an eros of consumption foreign to the Soviet productive sublime that reified human labor power instead of (or as) commodities.<sup>3</sup>

In the West, the technologized artistic practices of the avant-garde were all too susceptible to recuperation by a voracious and adaptable mass culture: “Its artistic inventions and techniques have been absorbed and co-opted by Western mass mediated culture in all its manifestations from Hollywood film, television, advertising, industrial design, and architecture to the aesthetization of technology and commodity aesthetics” (Huysen 15). The action, for Huysen, has moved toward studies of mass culture itself and the remnants of utopian imagination to be found there: “And yet—the utopian hopes of the historical avantgarde are preserved, even though in distorted form, in this system of secondary exploitation euphemistically called mass culture” (15). Compare this with Frederic Jameson’s description of modernism as a utopian compensation for reification that operates precisely by means of imitating it.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, chapter XX.

According to Jameson, modernism is “an ideological expression of capitalism”; its use of collage and the fragment reflect “the increasing fragmentation both of the rationalized external world and of the colonized psyche alike.” In other words, modernism answers capitalist reification with a reification of its own. But Jameson finds a redemptive possibility in this kind of “good” reification:

Yet modernism can at one and the same time be read as a Utopian compensation for everything reification brings with it. We stressed the semi-autonomy of the fragmented senses, the new autonomy and intrinsic logic of their henceforth abstract objects such as color or pure sound; but it is precisely this new semi-autonomy and the presence of these waste products of capitalist rationalization that open up a life space in which the opposite and the negation of such rationalization can be, at least imaginatively, experienced. The increasing abstraction of visual art thus proves not only to express the abstraction of daily life and to presuppose fragmentation and reification; it also constitutes a Utopian compensation for everything lost in the process of the development of capitalism—the place of quality in an increasingly quantified world, the place of the archaic and of feeling amid the desacralization of the market system, the place of sheer color and intensity within the grayness of measurable extension and geometrical abstraction. (*Political Unconscious* 236-37)

Still, there is no essential difference between the “Utopian compensation” of the modernist artwork and the affirmative recuperation of the traditional artwork: both are reducible to modes of consumption that attempt to compensate for the sacrifices required by techno-capitalist modes of production. What of the avant-garde: has it been totally absorbed by mass culture as Huyssen claims, so that “the products and

performances of the various neo-avantgardes... more often than not, derive their originality from social and aesthetic amnesia” (15)? Or is there any room left for avant-garde practices that maintain their narrow but crucial difference from the practices of technological capitalism as such? Both Bürger’s and Huyssen’s conceptions of the avant-garde are informed by historical pessimism: for them, it took on particular manifestations in the early and mid-twentieth century that have demonstrably failed. The passing of the historical avant-garde means that, for Bürger, organic and inorganic modes of artmaking are equally (in)valid, equally incapable of challenging the structures and institutions of life under late capitalism. For Huyssen, “the best hopes of the historical avantgarde may not be embodied in art works at all, but in decentered movements which work toward the transformation of everyday life” (15). Buck-Morss, however, still sees a role for avant-garde artists—or, more precisely, avant-garde artworks—to play:

Artworks, not artists, are avant-garde, and even here the category is not a constant. It is the *aesthetic experience* of the artwork... that counts in a cognitive sense. The power of any cultural object to arrest the flow of history, and to open up time for alternative visions, varies with history’s changing course. Strategies range from critical negativity to utopian representation. No one style, no one medium is invariably successful. Perhaps not the object but its critical interpretation is avant-garde. What counts is that the aesthetic experience teach us something new about our world, that it shock us out of moral complacency and political resignation, and that it take us to task for the overwhelming lack of social imagination that characterizes so much of cultural production in all its forms. (63, italics in original)

A careful reader of Adorno, Benjamin, Lukàcs, and Jameson, Buck-Morss here makes the beginnings of a case for a contemporary avant-garde. For her, avant-garde artworks are interruptions in “the flow of history”; since, pace Fukuyama,<sup>4</sup> history has not ended with the triumph of global capitalism, the avant-garde still has a job to do. “Shock” is the fundamental tactic of the avant-garde for Bürger and Buck-Morss alike, but for the latter the intent of this shock is less to erase the boundary between art and life than it is to startle the living into a fuller life, “out of moral complacency and political resignation,” and into the sphere of a specifically *social* imagination. Buck-Morss implicitly ties the task of the avant-garde artwork to that of Walter Benjamin’s “dialectical image,” by which he hoped to “awaken” the twentieth century from its dogmatic nineteenth-century slumbers. This function, more than any particular style, is what separates the avant-garde artwork from “cultural production” as a whole: both offer “*aesthetic experience*” but only the avant-garde work attempts “to arrest the flow of history, and to open up time for alternative visions.” Huysen has argued trenchantly for “the obsolescence of avantgarde shock techniques... shock can be exploited to reaffirm perception rather than change it” (15). But neither can the poets of the North American avant-garde tradition spanning from Pound to the Objectivists to the New Americans to Language poetry be confined to modernism as Huysen conceives it: “Contrary to the avantgarde’s intention to merge art and life, modernism always remained bound up with the more traditional notion of the autonomous art work, with the construction of form and meaning (however estranged or ambiguous, displaced or undecidable such meaning might be), and with the specialized status of

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<sup>4</sup> That is, against the argument that the triumph of “liberal democracy” and capitalist economics has put an end to the Hegelian course of history toward utopia. Buck-Morss does not address Fukuyama directly but the entire drift of her book rejects the notion that a Western conception of democratic political *space* has outstripped or made irrelevant its major challenger, the socialist conception of democratic political *time*. See Buck-Morss and see Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

the aesthetic” (192). I would rather assert that there is a strategic continuum between avant-gardism and modernism that these poets can be located on, and on which they often move back and forth over the course of their careers. Buck-Morss suggest a parallel continuum for the tactics of these artists ranging between “critical negativity” and “utopian representation.” The implication is that these tactics are basically opposed to each other; in fact, one might read Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* as a tortured and tortuous attempt to reconcile or at least read the dialectic between them, while its representative artists—Schonberg and Beckett—suggest an austere modernism brushed with the utopian aspirations of an avant-garde. In the American avant-garde tradition, it is modernism’s negativity—the manifest deferral, indeterminacy, or constructedness of meaning—that supplants or sublates shock as its primary tactic for “open[ing] up time for alternative visions.” What distinguishes the avant-pastoral, then, is its willingness to risk the tactic of utopian representation that Adorno forbade in the spirit of the Jewish prohibition on graven images.

The representation of the “middle landscape” by and through the “non-organic” technique of collage is the most characteristic move of the avant-pastoralists discussed in this study. Fragments of language from a variety of discourses—including the sometimes privileged discourse of naturalism and science—are assembled on the page in the “open field” of free-verse composition as theorized by the poet Charles Olson, in some respects the key figure that connects the three poets under discussion. In his 1950 essay “Projective Verse,” which laid a good deal of the groundwork for the postwar avant-garde, Olson argues for an “OPEN,” improvisatory practice of “COMPOSITION BY FIELD” (*Collected Prose* 239) while also insisting that “the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an eneregy-discharge” (240). Olson thus puts forward a notion of a constructivist poetics that extends William Carlos Williams’ famous definition of the poem as a

machine made of words: the poem of the open field is both a construct and a discharge—not a monument or an industrial process but a vehicle. “A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader” (240). Olson goes on to trace the path of poetic energy as “projected” directly from the poet’s body: “the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE” (242). He insists on the organicity of the open field poem as opposed to “what a French critic calls ‘closed’ verse, that verse which print bred” (239) through his privileging of the poet’s breath, and implies a genealogy by which the poem of breath, the open poem, precedes the closed poem, as agriculture precedes urban culture, or as production precedes consumption: “What we have suffered from, is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice, a removal by one, by two removes from its place of origin *and* its destination” (245). Olson’s language of the field thus has a pastoral ring: “It is my impression that *all* parts of speech suddenly, in composition by field, are fresh for both sound and percussive use, spring up like unknown, unnamed vegetables in the patch, when you work it, come spring” (244). And, seizing upon and changing the “objectivism” he attributes to Pound and Williams (Zukofsky is curiously omitted), Olson proposes an egoless “‘objectism,’ a word to be taken to stand for the kind of relation of man to experience which a poet might state as the necessity of a line or a work to be as wood is, to be as clean as wood is as it issues from the hand of nature” (247). Projective verse is thus imagined as a means toward achieving a new, “clean” relation to nature, by which the new poetry shall be produced:

It comes to this: the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence. If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but

himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. And by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way. It is in this sense that the projective act, which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than the man. For a man's problem, the moment he takes speech up in all its fullness, is to give his work his seriousness, a seriousness sufficient to cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature. (247)

Olson's "seriousness" is analogous of what Zukofsky calls "sincerity"; he even uses the same figure of autonomous "shapes" to describe the relationship between the poet's sincere/serious stance and the poem's form:

In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody of form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody. Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness. (P+ 194)

With more direct emphasis than Zukofsky, Olson situates the stance by which "shapes will make their own way" without resorting to "artificial forms" within the poet's attitude to nature: if he is egolessly "contained within his nature" he can achieve "a seriousness sufficient to cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature." That is, the poem both contains objects and is an object, coming to presence as natural objects do. But for all of Olson's insistence on the naturalness and

organicism of “projective verse”—for all the organic flavor of his phrase “composition by field” and his privileging of terms like “BREATH” and “EAR”—what his procedural method comes down to, for the reader at least, is the visual collage of verbal elements on the page. Only through collage can the objects of the poem—referents and signifiers alike—achieve the presence-effect that Olson desires: “every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; and that these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world” (*Collected Prose* 243).

It is here that we encounter the knottiest problem in considering avant-pastoral, which is the mode’s insistent conflation of word with world. The emphasis of one element or the other in this equation brings a vast array of consequential effects and contexts within modernist poetics. Emphasizing the wordliness of the world has become the more familiar mode: this is the notorious linguistic “turn” by which everything is reduced to discourse and the horizon of the poem is necessarily reduced to the social and epistemological. This is the terrain of Language poetry, the most durable of the contemporary avant-gardes: a movement that, in its emphasis on radical parataxis as a means of shocking the reader into awareness of the textures of discourse, directly descends from the technique of Pound (albeit a Pound refracted through Marx). But to read Pound as the Language poets do is to miss the other point of pressure, which in the case of Zukofsky and Johnson must lead to outright misreadings. To emphasize the worldliness of words, as Olson seems to do, is a fundamentally Romantic gesture: a wish that one might pronounce one’s ontology. Olson himself, in his criticism of T.S. Eliot, claims a distinction between Eliot’s “non-projective” practice of verse drama as intellectual and “outward” whereas “a

projective poet will, down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs” (249). From the poet’s breath and body Olson evolves a metaphysics of the Word fundamentally opposed to the linguistic turn that underwrites the Language poets’ materialism. In his essay “Human Universe,” Olson sees the discursive practices that underwrite a purely social interpretation of reality as obstacles to other orders of experience: “discourse has arrogated to itself a good deal of experience which needed to stay put—needs now to be returned to the only two universes which count, the two phenomenal ones, the two a man has need to bear on because they bear so on him: that of himself, as organism, and that of his environment, the earth and planets” (156).

Olson’s is a pastoral metaphysics insofar as his thought continually returns to “SPACE,” the open space of the page or the “harsh” space of the American landscape (from *Call Me Ishmael*: “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America” [17]), and insofar as he fiercely criticizes “the arbitrary and disursive” (157) Western strategies of mapping, subdividing, and controlling that space. Instead he calls for a freshly originary relation to the “human universe,” asking with Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” At the same time, the Olsonian version of pastoral has considerably more grit to it than the sentimental fantasy of harmony with nature: Olson’s heroes are the fishermen of Gloucester, who live on the margins between the dangers of nature and the corruption of the “polis” by commercial and political interests that seek to “advertise you out.” Their “middle landscape” is constantly under threat, its marginal status emphasized by the geography of Gloucester as a seaport. Historically, too, Gloucester as working-class town is under threat as the New Deal America Olson fought for as a political appointee in Washington during World War II is succeeded by Cold War America, whose

productive capacities are ever more bent toward meeting the needs of the military-industrial complex.

Olson's version of pastoral can be partly elucidated through the thought of two great modernist thinkers, Theodor W. Adorno and Martin Heidegger, who though fundamentally opposed in politics and methodology both turn to the artwork as a kind of pastoral refuge, shelter, or redoubt from the Benjaminian storm of history. Heidegger famously asks the question, "What are poets for in a destitute time?"; Adorno of course is fiercely critical of Heideggerian existentialism and "the jargon of authenticity." Adorno's view of art is more nuanced, more historical, and more tortured than Heidegger's; unlike Heidegger, Adorno gives the "destitute time" the ghastly name of "after Auschwitz," and finds a kernel of barbarism in the artwork that can be extinguished only at the cost of the work's truth content. In spite of this, Heidegger's decidedly undialectical aesthetic theory stands in a relation to Adorno's that deepens the latter's dialectic, helping us better to understand what poetry, particularly pastoral poetry, after Auschwitz might look like, and what it might be for. In his essays, "The Origin of the Work of Art" and "What Are Poets For?", Heidegger locates the work of the artwork within various spatial metaphors: that of the Open, the clearing (*Lichtung*) and the "precinct" or "house of Being" that is language. These spaces exist to utterly transform the relation between subject and object, and in so doing to transform subject and object themselves into *Dasein* and thing. This changed relation, which constitutes a rejection or at least a momentary abeyance from the Cartesian, rational thinking associated with the domination of nature, mirrors the reconciled subjectivity and objectivity that Adorno cannot quite bring himself to imagine, much less posit, in *Aesthetic Theory*. While the gulf between the two thinkers yawns as wide as that between positivity and negativity, the tasks they imagine for the

artwork, and the ways in which centering their thought on the artwork problematizes the question of subjectivity, have remarkable similarities.

For Heidegger, the function of the artwork is to place human beings in relation with nature, so that they may rediscover themselves and their world (what Olson calls the “human universe”). As he writes in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” “To be a work means to set up a world” (PLT 44) in which others can live; the artwork lights a “clearing”: “Only this clearing grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are” (PLT 53). By ascribing the task of clearing and disclosure (*aletheia*) to the *work*, Heidegger elides and minimizes the place of the artist in a manner similar to Adorno, who speaks of the place of the subject’s relation to the artwork in an ambiguous fashion that relegates the largest part of agency to the artwork itself: “In the artwork the subject is neither the observer nor the creator nor absolute spirit, but rather spirit bound up with, preformed and mediated by the object” (AT 166). The artist’s role is “minimal” he “labors” in such a way as to renounce the kind of intentionality associated with discursive communication:

It is as labor, and not as communication, that the subject in art comes into its own. It must be the artwork’s ineluctable ambition to achieve balance without ever quite being able to do so: This is an aspect of aesthetic semblance. The individual artist also functions as the executor of this balance. It is hard to say whether, in the production process, he is faced with a self-imposed task; the marble block in which a sculpture waits, the piano keys in which a composition waits to be released, are probably more than metaphors for the task. The tasks bear their objective solution in themselves, at least within a certain variational range, though they do not have the univocity of equations. The act

carried out by the artist is minimal, that of mediating between the problem that confronts him and is already determined, and the solution, which is itself similarly lodged in the material as a potential. If the tool has been called the extension of an arm, the artist could be called the extension of a tool, a tool for the transition from potentiality to actuality. (AT 166)

The role of the Heideggerian artist is equally minimal; Heidegger's idiom of *Gelassenheit* speaks to a kind of necessary modesty on the artist's part:

The more venturesome ones [the artists] do not venture themselves out of selfishness, for their own personal sake. They seek neither to gain an advantage nor to indulge their self-interest. Nor, even though they are more venturesome, can they boast of any outstanding accomplishments. For they are more daring only by a little, "more daring by a breath." The "more" of their venture is as slight as a breath which remains fleeting and imperceptible. (PLT 119)

For Adorno the diminishment of the artist as subject brings a corresponding rise in the importance of the larger objectivity in which he participates:

The artist carries out a minimal transition, not the maximal *creatio ex nihilo*. The differential of the new is the locus of productivity. It is the infinitesimally small that is decisive and shows the individual artist to be the executor of a collective objectivity of spirit in contrast to which his own part vanishes. This was implicitly recognized in the idea of genius as receptive and passive, which opens a view to that in artworks that makes them more than their primary definition, more than artifacts. Their desire to be thus and not otherwise functions in opposition to the

character of an artifact by driving it to its extreme: the sovereign artist would like to annul the hubris of creativity. (AT 270)

The *artwork* has “desire”: this is what makes it “more.” This distinctly subjective excess immanent to the artwork is the linchpin of its truth-content. The concept of *Wahrheitsgehalt* elides or at least postpones the question of who shall receive truth in favor of asking after the nature of the truth peculiar to the artwork. This truth begins obscurely in the deliberate confusion and combination of “form” and “content” (*Inhalt*) that is signified by the German *Gehalt*—not by any means to be confused with the transformation of form into content that Adorno associates with classicism (AT 162). By combining the ideas commonly referred to as “form” and “content” (in a sense reconstituting the famous dictum of poet Robert Creeley as recorded by Olson, “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT” [*Collected Prose* 240]), Adorno places the emphasis neither on the receiver of the artwork nor its producer, but the artwork itself: “The campaign against formalism ignores the fact that form that befalls content [*Inhalt*] is itself sedimented content; this, and not regression to any pre-artistic emphasis on content, secures the primacy of the object in art” (AT 144-45). The “object” is not merely objective, then, but a place for the play of an ambiguously located subjectivity beyond either the artist’s or observer’s intentions, and beyond even the Cartesian subject-object relation upon which scientific and philosophical knowledge is founded: “Through the freedom of the subject *in* them, artworks are less subjective than discursive knowledge” (AT 126, emphasis added). In sentences like this, Adorno hints at a kind of “subjectivity” that cannot own the name, which is only capable of arising in what has been conceptualized as the *space* of the artwork. It requires a step away from the Cartesian intentionality that orders the discourse of domination that is the language of the “administered” postwar world.

Heidegger puts his faith in a poetic saying whose power of accomplishment depends on their being something in “saying” that goes beyond discursive intentionality: “there is a saying that really engages in saying, yet without reflecting upon language, which would make even language into one more object. To be involved in saying is the mark of a saying that follows something to be said, solely in order to say it” (PLT 137). “Their song does not solicit anything to be produced” (138): here Heidegger does Kant one better by ascribing a purposiveness to “song” which is not merely purposeless, but unproductive. This illuminates too the radical nature of Kant’s doctrine of disinterestedness as a prerequisite for aesthetic experience: like the poet who abandons the thinking that produces objects (that is, interested thinking), the observer must similarly abandon all interest, including self-interest, and choose “secureness” over “defense”: “A safety exists only outside the objectifying turning away from the Open, ‘outside all caring,’ outside the parting against the pure draft” (PLT 120). The observer who achieves safety is the Heideggerian thinker, whose thinking is another mode by which conceptual, interest-driven cognition is set aside: “Few are experienced enough in the difference between an object of scholarship and the matter thought” (PLT 5). The subject *qua* subject must be replaced by a “thinker,” and the object replaced by the thing (*das Ding*). Heidegger’s thought has strong pastoral implications: he implies that the “thinker” stands apart from production and the logic of modernity, “secure” in nature without having to defend himself either from it or from the logic of domination. Adorno, of course, criticizes Heidegger’s approach as the jargon of authenticity weaving its mystifying spell. There is unquestionably an aconceptual moment for the subject to be found in the Adornian artwork, but the labor required to create and release the artwork’s truth content requires a subject prior and posterior to this moment. Only a subject with a strong grasp of the conceptual, who produces objects for his thinking, is

capable of synthesizing the mere *Erlebnis* of aesthetic experience into the *Erfahrung* of its truth (AT 346). And for Adorno the bourgeois subject is a fading relic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and no substitute can be found either for the minimal labor which that subject will provide as producer (the “something minimal required by the artwork for its crystallization” [AT 167] which is probably the subjective intention that must exist prior to its being exceeded by mimesis) or the more emphatic conceptual labor of the subjective observer.

Yet there is a sense in which Adorno, like Heidegger, wants to go beyond the subject who in modernity invariably falls hostage to instrumental thinking. Adorno scorns the existential language of “decision” by which Heidegger implies the resurrection of an authentic subjectivity becomes possible—but as Heidegger is at pains to point out in *Being and Time*, *Dasein* is not a subject sealed off in some sort of bubble from which it takes the world as its object (BT ¶13). Cartesian subjectivity is an invention that corresponds to the transformation of the world into an object for man’s use and exploitation: “In place of the world-content of things that was formerly perceived and used to grant freely of itself, the object-character of technological domination spreads itself over the earth ever more quickly, ruthlessly, and completely” (PLT 114). Heidegger’s notion of a “world-content of things” that was free of human domination, and which did not threaten humans, shows him at his most pastoral and most naïve; yet this myth is similar to the telos of Adorno’s negative dialectics: “The cognitive utopia would be to use concepts to unseal the non-conceptual with concepts, without making it their equal” (ND 10)—that is, priority would be given to the “non-conceptual,” which is the realm of nature and the aesthetic. If that is philosophy’s utopia, the next best thing for Adorno would be an aesthetic theory that unseals the space of the non-conceptual in culture—that is, the artwork—with concepts, without that theory supplanting art itself (as in Hegel). The willingness of a

subject to abandon the conceptuality that constitutes it as a subject and enter the mimetic, non-conceptual space of the artwork is the predicate for meaningful aesthetic experience, while the re-application of the conceptual by a subject who has passed through that non-conceptual space is equally critical. The encounter with the artwork is the moment when subject and object become mediated into each other and temporarily cease to exist as such.

The artwork draws the subject into a dialectic in which subjectivity and objectivity are implicated in each other, creating a space in which the observer's own subjectivity is similarly dissolved and constellated. The observer takes a considerable risk: his subjectivity must be strong enough to survive throwing the dice without "extend[ing] the comportment of unbroken self-preservation" (AT 266). He must, in Heidegger's language, "venture," abandoning the reified structures that *protect* him from bare reality and instead affirmatively choose the "unshieldedness" of "the Open." He must enter "the clearing" made by the artwork: "art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual. By virtue of the projected sketch set into the unconcealedness of what is, which casts itself toward us, everything ordinary and hitherto existing becomes an unbeing" (PLT 72). In the moment of entering the clearing, the dice are rolled, and the seeming stability of beings, including the being who is literally "being-there," *Dasein*, is put at risk, so that other possibilities of being might emerge.

The nature of the clearing or "the Open" that an artwork "lightens" is easily obscured by Heidegger's tendency to assert that clearing as always predicating a new metaphysics, whether that be the work of the primordial "temple" ("The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world and at the same time sets this world back again on earth, which itself only thus emerges as native ground" [PLT 42]) or the modernist poetry of a "destitute time." Adorno would categorically reject the metaphysical

reconstruction Heidegger's poet is trying to prepare for. But there is an Adornian truth in Heidegger's statement, "In the age of the world's night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured" (PLT 92). Adorno does not foresee any return of the "divine radiance" of a new metaphysics; but "the abyss of the world," its *Abgrund*, is real. Though their prognoses differ, the diagnoses of the modern condition offered by Heidegger and Adorno have remarkable consonances. Where Adorno speaks of a dogmatic "total administration" that is ever weakening the once proud bourgeois subject through the agency of the culture industry, Heidegger writes of a technological "willing" that is similarly destined for domination and destruction of the self:

It is not only the totality of this willing that is dangerous, but willing itself, in the form of self-assertion within a world that is admitted only as will. The willing that is willed by this will is already resolved to take unconditional command. By that resolve, it is even now delivered into the hands of total organization. But above all, technology itself prevents any experience of its nature. For while it is developing its own self to the full, it develops in the sciences a kind of knowing that is debarred from ever entering into the realm of the essential nature of technology, let alone retracing in thought that nature's origin. (PLT 117)

"What has long since been threatening man with death, and indeed with the death of his own nature, is the unconditional character of mere willing in the sense of purposeful self-assertion in everything" (116). Not just the "nature" of technology, but human nature—indeed what Heidegger calls "the non-objective character of full Nature" (112), which is Nature writ large—is threatened, indeed overwritten, by technological thinking. Poetry, and thinking in Heidegger's emphatic sense, stand opposed to this technological thinking—"the will"—which is a thinking for production, which "is possible only in [the] objectification" (120) that is technological

thinking's means toward production. This sense of objectification is basically identical to Adornian reification, though it elides Adorno's crucial passage through Marx. He would read Heidegger's language of "the question of technology" as being itself a disingenuous reification of the dialectic of Enlightenment:

For generally the utilization of machinery and the manufacture of machines is not yet technology itself—it is only an instrument concordant with technology, whereby the nature of technology is established in the objective character of its raw materials. Even this, that man becomes the subject and the world the object, is a consequence of technology: nature establishing itself, and not the other way around. (PLT 112)

Insofar as Adorno sees industrial capitalism as the product or vehicle of the Enlightenment, he might be able to accept Heidegger's hypostasis of technology insofar as it locates the force of *technē* within the larger Western philosophical project that the Enlightenment brought to its fullest realization. He would have a harder time accepting that it is possible to view objects as something other than objects—the Heideggerian *das Ding*. The transformation of the subject-object relation implied by the Heideggerian "thing" would appear as dogmatic nonsense to Adorno: for him there is no willed deconversion of the "standing reserve" of "natural resources" back into things which exist beyond their possibility of being used by a subject. He would probably dismiss Heidegger's position as a Rilkean lament for use-value in the face of the predomination of exchange-value, by which what Heidegger calls "full Nature" comes to be replaced by "the unexperienced nature of technology" (PLT 113). "Full Nature" cannot simply be dogmatically willed back into existence, any more than reconciliation is possible for the artwork made in a totally unreconciled world. The work of *phusis* that Heidegger attributes to the primordial artwork cannot be wished

back into place—in any case, *physis* is difficult to imagine without a metaphysics, and it is doubtful whether Adorno would see the return of “the gods” as desirable, even if it were possible: Adorno’s implicit theology is always the monotheistic one of future redemption. And yet if the clearing, the space of *das Ding*, might be understood as the monad is—not just a space but a moment—we see that a temporary reconciliation of subject and object is as imaginable, if unlivable, for Adorno as the light of redemption itself. It constitutes an outside, a refuge, not a metaphysics. Historicized, passed through Adorno, the clearing becomes the “above” from which a light could be imagined shining, and not a *Grund* to build upon (MM 247).

The saving grace of Heidegger’s gods is their unmetaphysical aspect. If we are not so hasty as to dismiss his talk of “gods” as mystical obscurantism or dogmatic yearning, we can recognize this component of the “fourfold” (earth, sky, gods, men) as that within the world that stands most opposed to the dialectic of Enlightenment, the ratio, and subject-object thinking. We do not have to believe in Heidegger’s destination to find his path through the woods (his *Holzwege*) useful. The fourfold is not a metaphysics, though it sounds metaphysical: it is rather the means by which we can imagine any given metaphysics as consisting of this or that proportion of earth to gods, sky to men. Heidegger himself is not dialectical, but his thinking (*Denken*) is dialectically illuminated and made possible in its relation to poetry (*Dichtung*). Poetry for Heidegger is the thinking that is done by no subject and has no objects: it does not think of an object but thinks the thing. The meaning of this is discovered privately: Heidegger’s *Denken* is not technological, does not convert objects into a standing reserve, does not “recognize” objects at all. To think is to cast aside one’s own subjectivity as a comportment of mastery, self-preservation, and recuperation of the ever-same, and instead to enter the unshieldedness of “the whole of beings” (PLT 106) in which we always already reside. To think is to realize one’s being-there as a being-

with the Others who are also being-there. “To poet” (*dichten*) is to say, to proclaim one’s relation with these Others, who are not objects but other *Dasein*, and to do so by permitting what surpasses intention in language to overwhelm communication (the comportment of a subject). The relation itself is what shines through the words, disclosing the person who is there as *Dasein* in fleeting relation to other *Dasein*. The “productive” thinking of the subject-object will return: the time of the gods sheltered by an earthly temple has passed. Instead, the clearing of the artwork can be a momentary refuge in which the subject abandons itself for being-there. It can and must return again to the world of *das Man*, the inauthentic collectivity dominated by idle chatter, curiosity, and ambiguity into which *Dasein* finds itself “thrown” (BT ¶35-38). There the possibilities for the discovery of *Dasein* and its meaningful dwelling being diminished every day: “our dwelling today is harassed by work, made insecure by the hunt for gain and success, bewitched by the entertainment and recreation industry” (PLT 213). We are not so far now from Adorno’s hope and Adorno’s despair.

Adorno will not give validation to any utopia, any reconciliation, that is not total: totality is a prerequisite for utopia as such. His materialism requires utopia to be an enjoyment of goods and not solely the cold light of messianic radiance: utopia must be *produced*. This sensualist utopia is explicitly rejected by Heidegger as being pastoral in the false sense, the artificial sense—one which only conceals man’s “purposeful self-assertion” in everything:

What threatens man in his very nature is the willed view that man, by the peaceful release, transformation, storage, and channeling of the energies of physical nature, could render the human condition, man’s being, tolerable for everybody and happy in all respects. But the peace of this peacefulness is merely the undisturbed continuing relentlessness of the fury of self-assertion which is resolutely self-reliant. What

threatens man in his very nature is the view that this imposition of production can be ventured without any danger, as long as other interests besides—such as, perhaps, the interests of a faith—retain their currency. As though it were still possible for that essential relation to the whole of beings in which man is placed by the technological exercise of his will to find a separate abode in some side-structure which would offer more than a temporary escape into those self-deceptions among which we must count also the flight to the Greek gods! (PLT 116-17)

So we see that even in the telos of their utopian yearnings Heidegger and Adorno remain utterly incompatible. Adorno will never surrender the role of subjectivity and conceptual, productive thought: his materialism and devotion to the project of Enlightenment (however compromised he knows that project to be) will not allow it. And Heidegger's existential promises of flight for the individual *Dasein* from an unacceptable but unchangeable material reality at least in part reflect the cynicism of a man whose political engagements created an ethical disaster from which his reputation will never fully recover. Still, out of the shared cultural conservatism suggested by their mutual attachment to Hölderlin, a shared utopian radicalism of the subject liberated by and through the artwork becomes visible in both thinkers.

Charles Olson did as much to formulate the crisis of the postwar "turn" for poetry as Adorno and Heidegger attempted to do for philosophy. His version of pastoral manifests as a place in which their differing approaches to the role of art in a destitute time meet. Olson's diagnosis of "the world's night" after World War II corresponds with theirs, but more than that seems to link Adorno's conviction that the self and self-experience are overdetermined by the social totality with Heidegger's

sense of the agony of being-with when it is reduced to the “common character” of *das*

*Man:*

ya, selva oscura, but hell now  
is not exterior, is not to be got out of, is  
the coat of your own self, the beasts  
emblazoned on you And who  
can turn this total thing, invert  
and let the ragged sleeves be seen  
by any bitch or common character? Who  
can endure it where it is, where the beasts are met,  
where yourself is, your beloved is, where she  
who is separate from you, is not separate, is not  
goddess, is, as your core is,  
the making of one hell (“In Cold Hell, in Thicket,” PAP 6)

Against this, Olson seems to gesture toward a Heideggerian moment of decision, of  
existential “strength,” only to withdraw it again as a deception:

(there is always a field,  
for the strong there is always  
an alternative)

But a field

is not a choice, is  
as dangerous as a prayer, as a death, as any  
misleading, lady (PAP 7)

What matters is the “field,” the “page as field” determined by the poet’s own  
“breath” (PAP 614)—the space of the artwork, which is a space of encounter and “not  
a choice.” Olson writes in favor of mimesis, of bodily “proprioception,” as an antidote  
to the instrumental spirit, even as he acknowledges how the culture industry  
overwhelms this attempt:

By ear, he sd.  
But that which matters, that which insists, that which will last,  
that! o my people, where shall you find it, how, where, where shall you  
listen  
when all is become billboards, when, all, even silence, is spray-  
gunned?

when ever our bird, my roofs,  
cannot be heard

when even you, when sound itself is neoned in? (“I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You,” PAP 9)

The only solution he can imagine is a withdrawal from totality into the pastoral space of Gloucester, Massachusetts. By gathering forces in a limited space, non-conceptual mimesis might have a chance to survive without sacrificing the critical dimension of subjectivity required to keep total administration at bay:

o tansy city, root city  
let them not make you  
as the nation is

I speak to any of you, not to you all, to no group, not to you as citizens as my Tyrian might have. Polis now is a few, is a coherence not even new (the island of this city is a mainland now of who? who can say who are citizens?)

Only a man or a girl who hear a word  
and that word meant to mean not a single thing the least more than  
what it does mean (not at all to sell any one anything, to keep them  
anywhere,  
not even  
in this rare place. (“Letter 3,” PAP 13)

Olson’s solution is no solution: “It is undone business / I speak of” (PAP 15).

The undoneness—the temporary nature of the clearing—is the pastoral moment that dialecticizes the Heideggerian artwork and makes it receptive to the impossible demands of the Adornian utopia. History enters the poem of Olson and puts decision and concept, thing and object, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* in relation with each other. It is his path that illuminates the possibilities and pitfalls of modernist pastoral in the work of the poets here as they attempt to negotiate the space between myth and enlightenment, country and city, utopia and nightmare.

## CHAPTER 1

### Some Versions of Avant-Pastoral

#### *1. Pastoral versus Utopia*

As Frederic Jameson has shown, literary representations of utopia have historically had a specifically critical function: a text like Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* is a point-by-point negative image of the world that actually existed in Butler's time. Contrasted with this negative or critical utopian representation is the positive utopian representation of the kind of text that Jameson constructs as "pastoral":

A regressive pastoral like W.H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age* (1887), which certainly shares Utopian features with the classical works in the genre, is distinguished from the latter primarily by the absence of any of those one-to-one allusions—generally in the form of inversions—that make the reading of Utopias a process of allegorical decipherment. So in Butler's *Erewhon*, machines are evil and illegal precisely because in Victorian England industrial progress is an ideological value presupposed in advance and uncontested; but Hudson's return to some earlier precapitalist form—whether savagery or barbarism—is an appeal to a generalized and global nostalgia, rather than to a precise set of decoding operations. This kind of idyll or fantasy, in other words, is, unlike Utopia, precisely a representation and musters its narrative resources in order to impose the fullness of an image of a different form of life, an image the fascinated contemplation of which includes both anxiety and longing within itself. ("Islands" 82)

The point-by-point "allegorical decipherment" that Jameson says is required from readers of a utopian text is analogous to the task of critique that Adorno sees as necessary for discovering the truth content of artworks:

[I]f finished works only become what they are because their being is a process of becoming, they are in turn dependent on forms in which their process crystallizes: interpretation, commentary, and critique. These are not simply brought to bear on works by those who concern themselves with them; rather they are the arena of the historical development of artworks in themselves, and thus they are forms in their own right. They serve the truth content of works as something that goes beyond them, which separates this truth content—the task of critique—from elements of its untruth. If the unfolding of the work in these forms is not to miscarry, they must be honed to the point where they become philosophical. It is from within, in the movement of the immanent form of artworks and the dynamic of their relation to the concept of art, that it ultimately becomes manifest how much art—in spite of, and because of, its monadological essence—is an element in the movement of spirit and of social reality. (AT 194)

Adorno does not restrict the application of the tools of interpretation to works that are explicitly utopian; it is rather the case that *all* works of art can be read as negative allegories of the historical world they are produced in. For Adorno then it is the function of critical interpretation to create the “arresting” effect of artworks that embark upon utopian representation—to discover their negativity. This is less necessary for those avant-garde works that are negative on their face and whose representations are entirely dystopian—the paradigmatic example for Adorno would be Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*. But where does pastoral stand on the avant-garde continuum, if it has a place there at all? For Jameson, a pastoral like Hudson’s is ipso facto “regressive,” derived from “a general and globalized nostalgia” and lacking the critical capacity of the utopia. If the utopian text manages to make “critical negativity”

the basic structural principle of its “utopian representation,” the pastoral text simply represents, “in order to impose the fullness of an image of a different form of life, an image the fascinated contemplation of which includes both anxiety and longing within itself.” Pastoral does not demand Adornian critical labor so much as it induces “fascinated contemplation.” Its strictly latent negativity (“anxiety”) is mixed up with “longing” for a “precapitalist” form of life. Here emerges the traditional association of pastoral with an image of life lived in harmonious contact with nature, a “middle landscape” between inhospitable wilderness and a dystopian urban civilization. The pastoral image is of what Jameson elsewhere calls “precapitalist enclaves of Nature,” enclaves that can only actually survive in the world of late capitalism in the form of “the precapitalist agriculture and village culture of the Third World” (“Pleasure” 63) and in the human unconscious—the reservoir of “human nature.” The implication is that human nature comes to its fullest flowering in a rural, precapitalist environment: a notion most clearly articulated for the tradition of modern poetry in English by Wordsworth’s “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*”:

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men.... Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and, from the

necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men is adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. (40-41)

As Raymond Williams has shown, the reality of rural life in Wordsworth's time, or even much earlier, was no more or less "precapitalist" than city life; the notion that the pace of history is somehow retarded in the countryside comes under sustained attack in his book *The Country and the City*. But the idealization of rural life has been intrinsic to pastoral since Virgil, who confirms the necessity of that idealization to the genre in the transition between the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*, the latter of which actually contain concrete instructions for conducting agriculture. The question at this point is not the relative realism of pastoral but the way in which its irrationalism differs from that of the utopia. One key difference is their differing temporal orientation: pastoral is nostalgic and looks to the past, while utopias are either spatial alternatives to the civilized center (as the island of More's *Utopia* is the mirror-image island of Britain) or else are projected into the future (this is the case both for literary utopias such as Morris' *News from Nowhere* and political mass-utopias like Soviet Communism). Utopias have a messianic quality to them, made explicit by Adorno's reference to "the messianic light" of the future whose perspective on the fallen present

is what avant-garde artworks must try to present. Pastoral does not provide this eschatological viewpoint. In a sense, the divide can be perceived in the two major meanings of “pastoral literature”: poetry about shepherds and the writing of Christian sermons. The pastoralist who seeks metaphorical sheep to herd toward redemption is equivalent neither to the writer of pastoral poetry nor the simple people he represents. The pastoral difference is generally constructed as weakness: Jameson calls it “regressive,” while Renato Poggioli picks up on the crucial difference between pagan pastoral and Christian redemption on the first page of his study of the genre, *The Oaten Flute*:

The psychological root of the pastoral is a double longing after innocence and happiness, to be recovered not through conversion or regeneration but merely through a retreat. By withdrawing not from the world but from “the world,” pastoral man tries to achieve a new life in imitation of the good shepherds of herds, rather than of the Good Shepherd of the Soul. The bucolic ideal stands at the opposite pole from the Christian one, even if it believes with the latter that the lowly will be exalted and that the only bad shepherds are shepherds of men. The bucolic invitation, to be like shepherds, although seemingly easier to follow than the Christian summons to self-sacrifice, has always remained a voice crying in the wilderness. Man has walked farther under the burden of Christ’s cross than with the help of the shepherd’s rod. Faith moves mountains, while a sentimental or aesthetic illusion is hardly able to force man to cross the short distance that separates town and country, or plowlands and woodlands. Christ kept his promise to the faithful, who found redemption and bliss through renunciation and martyrdom, while the few men who earnestly heeded the pastoral call

found in no time that country life is at best a purgatory, and that real shepherds are even less innocent and happy than citydwellers and courtiers.

If the Christian view rests on the cornerstone of creed, the pastoral ideal shifts on the quicksands of wishful thought. (1-2)

The devaluation of pastoral expressed through Poggioli's use of religious language is not very different from that hinted at by Adorno when, in the passage from *Minima Moralia* cited above, he writes that "To gain such perspectives [i.e., the messianic] without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects—this alone is the task of thought." As we shall see, velleity or a weak wishfulness is not incidental to pastoral but acts as one of its major structural principles. But Adorno is right to see that the other end of the utopian continuum is violence. The violence of political revolution or the repressive violence represented by "Christ's cross" and "renunciation and martyrdom" both incarnate the "critical negativity" pole of Buck-Morss' continuum of avant-garde tactics, while "utopian representation" stands forth as merely "the quicksands of wishful thought." The task of philosophical thought in Adorno's sense is to somehow negotiate these poles without succumbing to either—but this thought leaves the artwork stranded, or at best waiting for a thinker to unpack the secret negativity of its representation.

Yet this does not vitiate the allure and power of a pastoral representation that induces "fascinated contemplation" of itself. Adorno's aesthetic dialectic does discover value in the pastoral expression of wishfulness, as seen in his examination (with Max Horkheimer) of the Lotus Eaters episode in *The Odyssey*. They criticize the logic of "historical work," meant to achieve the happiness of a future utopia, for its exploitative violence that tramples upon the happiness of the present:

Against [Odysseus' men who have joined the Lotus-eaters] he asserts their own cause, the realization of utopia through historical work, whereas simply abiding within an image of bliss deprives them of their strength. But in being exerted by rationality, by Odysseus, this right is inevitably drawn into the realm of wrong. His immediate action is one which reasserts domination. Self-preserving reason can no more tolerate this bliss "near the rim of the world" than the more dangerous form it takes in later stages.... Lotus is an oriental food. Its thin-cut slices still play a part in Chinese and Indian cooking. Perhaps the temptation ascribed to it is no other than that of regression to the stage of gathering the fruits of the earth and the sea, older than agriculture, cattle-rearing, or even hunting—older, in short, than any production. (DoE 49-50)

It is clear that Adorno and Horkheimer are not endorsing this fantasy, any more than they would advocate a simple return to the myth that the Enlightenment has replaced and now threatens to become again. Its mythic quality is revealed less by its poetic context than by the notion of a mode of existence "older... than any production"; this goes well beyond Jameson's description of pastoral as an image of precapitalist existence (an image the Marxian tradition derives from Karl Marx's descriptions of the human relation to nature prior to the division of labor in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*). But the indolent Lotus Eaters who let history pass them by are the bearers of an important truth critical of the utilitarian rationality that has led to "total administration" (a mass-utopic term applicable to both capitalist and communist societies). They speak for the pleasure principle and protest at its deferral, either spatially as in capitalism (pleasure vanishes from the site of production and reappears in the illusory form of commodities) or temporally as in

communism (the present is sacrificed on behalf of the future). This structure of repression is amplified and accelerated by industrial modernity, which makes attractive the transformation of the ontogenetic nostalgia of the individual (for the Lotus-like “oceanic feeling” of infancy) into a phylogenetic nostalgia for archaic modes of production that did not depend upon the repression and abstraction of nature.

The slip from ontogenetic to phylogenetic nostalgia characteristic of pastoral was noted by Sigmund Freud, who did not share the Marxian nostalgia for precapitalist social organization: the “oceanic feeling” of childhood was not replicated in his own myth of prehistory, the primal horde of *Moses and Monotheism*. Still, he finds a kernel of truth in the hostility toward civilization that such nostalgia represented for him: repression, intrinsic to the exploitation on which civilized modes of production depend, is not any less of an evil for being unavoidable. Thus the longing described in *Civilization and Its Discontents* for a pastoral civilization that would be so perfectly arranged, so in harmony with nature (both external nature and the nature of the drives), that repression cease to be necessary:

One would think that a re-ordering of human relations should be possible, which would remove the sources of dissatisfaction with civilization by renouncing coercion and the suppression of the instincts, so that, undisturbed by internal discord, men might devote themselves to the acquisition of wealth and its enjoyment. That would be the golden age, but it is questionable if such a state of affairs can be realized. (687)

The pastoral fantasy resolves the contradictions between people and also the “dispute within the economics of the libido” (768-69) of individuals. Put another way, the pastoral fantasy is that of a world founded upon those same libidinal economics, as Jacques Lacan has described: “It is obvious that the libido, with its paradoxical,

archaic, so-called pregenital characteristics, with its eternal polymorphism, with its world of images that are linked to the different sets of drives associated with the different stages from the oral to the anal and the genital—all of which no doubt constitutes the originality of Freud’s contribution—that whole microcosm has absolutely nothing to do with the macrocosm; only in fantasy does it engender world” (92). Lacan praises Freud’s sober realism—“Henceforth we are to deal with the world where it is” (93) and damns what “might seem to be the search for a natural ethics” (88)—that is, a macrocosmic ethics based on the microcosm of the libido, which Lacan actually names “pastoral”:

And indeed, through a whole side of its action and its doctrine, psychoanalysis effectively presents itself as such, as tending to simplify some difficulty that is external in origin, that is of the order of a misrecognition or indeed of a misunderstanding, as tending to restore a normative balance with the world—something that the maturation of the instincts would naturally lead to.... The domain of the pastoral is never absent from civilization; it never fails to offer itself as a solution of the latter’s discontents. If I use that name, it is because over the centuries that is how it has happened to present itself openly. Nowadays, it is often masked; it appears for example in the more severe and more pedantic form of the infallibility of the proletarian consciousness—something that has preoccupied us for so long, although in recent years it has receded a little. It appears also in the form of the somewhat mythical notion I referred to just now concerning the hopes, however vague, that were raised by the Freudian revolution. But it’s the same old idea of the pastoral.... Perhaps we need to rediscover it, to rediscover its meaning. There is perhaps a good reason

why we should reexamine the archaic form of the pastoral, reexamine a certain return to nature or the hope invested in a nature that you shouldn't imagine our ancestors thought of in simpler terms than we do. We will see whether the inventions that the *ingenium* of our ancestors attempted in this direction teach us something that needs to be elucidated for us, too. (88-89)

Lacan rejects any interpretation of psychoanalysis as that which could somehow bring about a pastoral accommodation of the drives; he argues for the necessity of social sublimation in the light of the infinite plasticity of drives which can have no "natural" outlet. But his suggestions about the "microcosm" of the libido are tantalizing in the context of the poetic imagination. He cites Whitman as a poet who has imagined alternatives to genital sexuality, who has created in language a new—or very old—total erogenous zone or "opening":

In order to realize what is essential and original in Freud's thought here, it is sufficient to refer to those openings that the exercise of poetic lyricism gives. According to a given poet, to Walt Whitman for example, imagine what as a man one might desire of one's own body. One might dream of a total, complete, epidermic contact between one's body and a world that was itself open and quivering; dream of a contact and, in the distance, of a way of life that the poet points out to us; hope for a revelation of harmony following the disappearance of the perpetual, insinuating presence of the oppressive feeling of some original curse. (93)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Suggestive in this context of polymorphous perversity is what Poggioli calls the pastoral man's "ideal of an absolute erotic anarchism," which he dares to dream of, though it may not actually be realizable, even in Arcadia: "Thus he projects his yearning after free love, his longing for sexual freedom and even license, into a state of nature that exists nowhere, or only in the realm of myth" (*Oaten Flute* 13).

Although Lacan attacks this fantasy insofar as it has enshrined itself as the goal of certain practices of psychoanalysis, he also unpacks a theory of pastoral that comes close to being a theory of poetry as such. The ontogenetic nostalgia for an “open and quivering” world that Lacan sees in Whitman’s poetry is similar to the pre-Oedipal, pre-signifying zone of language that Julia Kristeva has termed “the Semiotic.” Lacan criticizes pastoral not for being the “golden age” falsely derived from Freud’s “oceanic feeling” but for assuming the mantle of a utopian future, of revelation: as if it were actually possible to dissipate the “original curse” of the Oedipus complex. Instead, he insists on the necessity of the Symbolic (Kristeva calls it the “thetic” dimension of language, which stands in opposition to the always provisional “semiotic” zone or *chora* of “drives and their articulations”<sup>2</sup>) which will always “write” erogenous pathways of desire onto the body, in so doing demonstrating the ultimate plasticity of those drives which have no natural “home” of pre-Oedipal, polymorphously perverse libidinality to return to.

That Freud and Lacan dismiss the pastoral fantasy as such in the same breath with which they raise it does not diminish its attractiveness, its imaginative potency, or its potential truth-content in the Adornian sense.<sup>3</sup> It is an impossible solution to a real problem: the repression of energies and the exploitation of self and others engendered by civilization in general and intensified by capitalism in particular. That negative situation has historically been met, in literature, by the writing of pastoral—which tends to arise, as here, even in “realistic” or pessimistic considerations of the

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<sup>2</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp.21-45.

<sup>3</sup> That is, subject to dialectical disclosure: “Like art itself, knowledge of it is consummated dialectically. The more the observer adds to the process, the greater the energy with which he penetrates the artwork, the more he then becomes aware of objectivity from within. He takes part in objectivity when his energy, even that of his misguided subjective ‘projection,’ extinguishes itself in the artwork. The subjective detour may totally miss the mark, but without the detour no objectivity becomes evident” (AT 175).

limitations of civilization and the human psyche. As Empson writes, “The poetic statements of human waste and limitation, whose function is to give strength to see life clearly and so to adopt a fuller attitude to it, usually bring in, or leave room for the reader to bring in, the whole set of pastoral ideas” (19). As a political program pastoral can only be utopian and nostalgic in the pejorative senses of those words: in the political field it tends to manifest as the “popular and sentimental” pastoral that Leo Marx characterizes as “generated by an urge to withdraw from civilization’s growing power and complexity” (9).<sup>4</sup> At its ugliest this becomes a form of populism that demonizes outsiders and “cosmopolitans”—the Nazi celebration of *Blut and Böden* being the best-known example of a “positive pastoral,” pastoral with aspirations toward ideological totality. Yet it is the tendency of the pastoral image as object of “fascinated contemplation” to undermine, as the Lotos Eaters do, historical and utopian narratives, especially those narratives that attempt to realize that image—to drag the pastoral into history. This tendency is intensified when the pastoral image is the product of the formal practices associated with modernism and the avant-garde. The intersection of modernism with pastoral fantasy tends to produce avant-garde artworks that have the potential Buck-Morss describes to “take us to task for the overwhelming lack of social imagination that characterizes so much of cultural production in all its forms” (63). In the case of avant-pastoral, I might emend that sentence to read “the overwhelming lack of social *and environmental* imagination.” In the West, and particularly in North America after World War II, the urgency of the

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<sup>4</sup> A significant exception might be found in the anarchist concept of the “Temporary Autonomous Zone” proposed by Hakim Bey: “The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it. Because the State is concerned primarily with Simulation rather than substance, the TAZ can ‘occupy’ these areas clandestinely and carry on its festal purposes for quite a while in relative peace” (##, italics in original). The carnivalesque nature of the TAZ as Bey describes it is, however, decidedly un-pastoral: it is an episode of Dionysian rather than Apollonian negativity. *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 1985, 1991).

pastoral critique has only intensified in the face of a hypercapitalist modernity that threatens to colonize every inch of existing nature, both on the planet and within the psyche.

The pastoralist dreams of a more perfect accommodation between the human world and nature: both their own nature (*Imwelt*) and that of the environment (*Umwelt*). Its representation is therefore dual: pastoral creates an image of social and personal *bonheur* but is largely recognizable as pastoral (as opposed to utopia more broadly defined) by the image it produces of human beings living in harmony with nature. The second image tends to take precedence over the first: not until William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* did the notion of pastoral as a social vision—the valorization of simple people and their “more fundamental” values—become a critical commonplace. The social and environmental implications of pastoral intersect most vividly in the image it creates of the perfect restricted economy, whose inhabitants are free from the necessity of exploiting either nature or each other in order to survive:

Pastoral economy seems to realize the contained self-sufficiency that is the ideal of the tribe, of the clan, of the family. The pastoral community produces all it needs, but nothing more, except for a small margin of security. It equates its desires with its needs; it ignores industry and trade; even its barter with the outside world is more an exchange of gifts than of commodities. Money, credit, and debt have no place in an economy of this kind. By a strange and yet natural miracle, the system seems to avoid any disproportion between production and consumption, despite its lack of planning and foresight. (*Oaten Flute* 5)

The “strange and yet *natural* miracle” of Arcadian life is brought about by adopting the “natural” as a principle of rhythm, perpetually balancing production with consumption. Nature produces all that is needed without having to be “challenged” in

Heidegger's sense of a productive technology that reduces the earth to a "standing-reserve," natural resources to be exploited according to the demands of industrial production. This challenging is contrasted with attentive making or *poiesis*, a mode of *techne* or "revealing" more primordial than that of modern technology:

The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [*Herausfordern*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such. But does this not hold true for the old windmill as well? No. Its sails do indeed turn in the wind; they are left entirely to the wind's blowing. But the windmill does not unlock energy from the air currents in order to store it. (*Basic Writings* 320)

The windmill becomes a kind of shepherd in Heidegger's description because it absorbs and discharges productive energy according to the rhythms of nature ("the wind's blowing") rather than taking an acquisitive stance toward that energy. We may guess that for Heidegger the "old windmill" is a figure for the pastoral economy that Poggioli describes, which manages "to avoid any disproportion between production and consumption, despite its lack of planning and foresight" (*Oaten Flute* 5). In the pastoral fantasy, the surrender of the technological will to "challenge" nature (the "planning and foresight" of production at its most accelerated and intense) permits and perhaps produces the providence of nature that makes labor unnecessary. But this bounty has its limits, again marked by the pastoral inhabitants' adoption of "natural" rhythms. Excess and expenditure (in Bataille's sense) are as foreign to pastoral as deprivation and want:

Yet the spontaneous generation of the staples of life does not change the pastoral countryside into a Land of Cockaigne, where sausages hang on the trees and people indulge in a perpetual kermess. Manna

does not fall on pastoral soil, and the shepherd neither fasts nor feasts but satisfies his thirst and hunger with earth's simplest gifts, such as fruit and water, or with the milk and cheese he gets from tending his sheep, which provide also the wool for his rustic garments. The shepherd does not need to grow wheat like the farmer, or prey on wildlife like the hunter. He is a vegetarian on moral as well as on utilitarian grounds, choosing to live on a lean diet rather than on the fat of the land. (5)

The "spontaneous generation" of pastoral nature means that the shepherd's relation to it is more aesthetic than practical; his minimal practical use of natural materials enables him to have the "disinterested" attitude toward nature that Kant requires for a judgment of its beauty. In the *Georgics*, it is the farmer who learns how to "turn the sod / Or marry elm with vine," actions by which he "makes the cornfield smile"; the harmonious relation between man and nature is accomplished through labor educated by practical knowledge. In the *Eclogues*, most particularly Eclogue I, it is nature that we see educated, not labor, which is no longer the principle means of mediating between human beings and nature. Tityrus teaches "the woods to echo 'Amaryllis'" (I.3); he instructs (*doces*) nature, conditioning it to respond to his erotic desires, and by so doing constitutes the landscape he occupies as a pastoral one, to be related to not in the language of productive labor but the language of song. It is not only nature that goes "unchallenged" in pastoral but the human being, who has no need to exploit himself or, by implication, others. He does not labor in the georgic sense; instead, his time is devoted to "gratuitous" pursuits:

By picking berries and gathering straw the shepherd may fill his bowl and build a roof over his head. This redeems him from the curse of work, which is part of man's estate and the specific lot of the peasant,

who earns his daily bread by the sweat of his brow. It is this triumph of the “days” over the “works,” rather than the mere replacement of a rural with a pastoral setting, that marks the difference between the bucolic and the georgic. The shepherd enjoys the blessings of idleness even more than the rich man, whose servants hardly lighten his burdens and whose cares never allow him to rest. Thus literary shepherds form an ideal kind of leisure class, free from the compulsions of conspicuous consumption and ostentatious waste. Gratuitous interests, including such leisurely activities as hobbies and pastimes, but excluding such strenuous exercises as sports, are the main endeavor of the pastoral world. (6)

The pastoral economy tends to sideline questions of the political for Poggioli, who sees it as “primarily the exaltation of a particular conception of private life” (23). Relations among Arcadians are peaceful or amorous; in Virgil’s *Eclogue I*, the banished Meliboeus betrays no jealousy of Tityrus, who has retained his land through the intercession of a “god” from Rome. The political world is exterior to the Arcadian one; it is not merely marginal to pastoral, it actively defines the margin between Arcadia and the city, just as the exploitative “challenge” to nature constitutes the margin between beneficent Arcadia and the hostile wilderness. The “ideal pasture” of Arcadia is a chiasmic point between wilderness and civilization, the moment of transition where human nature and external nature meet—the epidermic “openness” that Lacan detects in Whitman. Leo Marx calls it the “middle landscape”:

This ideal pasture has two vulnerable borders: one separates it from Rome, the other from the encroaching marshland. It is a place where Tityrus is spared the deprivations and anxieties associated with both the city and the wilderness. Although he is free of the repressions entailed

by a complex civilization, he is not prey to the violent uncertainties of nature. His mind is cultivated and his instincts are gratified. Living in an oasis of rural pleasure, he enjoys the best of both worlds—the sophisticated order of art and the simple spontaneity of nature. In a few lines Virgil quickly itemizes the solid satisfactions of the pastoral retreat: peace, leisure, and economic sufficiency. The key to all of these felicities is the harmonious relation between Tityrus and the natural environment. It is a serene partnership. In the pastoral economy nature supplies most of the herdsman's needs and, even better, nature does virtually all of the work. A similar accommodation with the idealized landscape is the basis for the herdsman's less tangible satisfactions: the woods "echo back" the notes of his pipe. It is as if the consciousness of the musician shared a principle of order with the landscape and, indeed, the external universe. The echo, a recurrent device in pastoral, is another metaphor of reciprocity. It evokes that sense of relatedness between man and not-man which lends a metaphysical aspect to the mode; it is a hint of the quasi-religious experience to be developed in the romantic pastoralism of Wordsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau. Hence the pastoral ideal is an embodiment of what Lovejoy calls "semi-primitivism"; it is located in a middle ground somewhere "between," yet in a transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature. (22-23)

There are two major layers to the idealized "middle" landscape of pastoral. In the first, strictly materialist layer, the special benefits of pastoral stem from its equidistant situation between nature as wilderness and civilization as repressive, so that the pastoralist himself enjoys both cultivation and gratification, both

sophistication and spontaneity. The second layer is, as Marx notes, metaphysical: a fantasy of humanity living in rhythmic harmony with nature. Somewhat effaced in this description is the connection between the two states: the woods echo back not the pure “consciousness of the musician” but music from his pipe—an emblem of culture, however rustic. It is not then some raw human consciousness that harmonizes with nature, but a particular human culture which has “cultivated” the mind of Tityrus without the taint of civilization’s repression of his “instincts” or drives. This would appear to be the culture of reciprocity written in the rhythms of culture, a fantasy in which labor and production are bracketed so that culture, in the form of song, becomes the primary means of establishing value. In pastoral, culture or the aesthetic sphere exceeds its usual mandate as a superstructure with only relative autonomy with respect to the economic base. In fact, its autonomy is increased to the point of destabilizing the entire base-superstructure model; it might even be said that in Arcadia, culture (poetry and song) is the base and economic production a superstructure whose main purpose is to provide a field in which song can take place—except that, of course, Arcadia exists nowhere but in song. Marx’s model also implies that the political is entirely marginal to pastoral, confined to the city and one of its instruments of repression. Yet politics intervenes at the very beginning of the *Eclogues* in the form of Meliboeus’ dispossession. Pastoral poetry attempts to intervene in and sublimate political relations just as it has with the relations of production, but its success in this area is more equivocal. In Eclogue I, the political is experienced primarily as an intruder (in the form of the soldiers who have usurped Meliboeus’ land) or as a transcendent, quasi-religious force (in the form of the “deus nobis” who restores Tityrus’ land to him). Politics menaces the peace and happiness of Arcadia from just outside of it, and poetry is at best ambiguously effective guardian of its borders. Tityrus has made an appeal to a “god”; what rhetorical force or role his poetry may have played in the

success of that appeal is not disclosed. In Eclogue IX, however, poetry is unable to effectively challenge the state's monopoly on violence. Learning of his friend Moeris' dispossession, Lycidas wonders:

But I was told Menalcas with his songs  
Had saved the land, from where those hills arise  
To where they slope down gently to the water,  
Near those old beech trees, with their broken tops. (IX, 71)

Poetry defines and defends the borders of Arcadia, within which it presides over a harmonious order distinguished from the violence of the exploitation of nature and the violence of the exploitation of men. But Moeris' reply is an eloquent summation of the political ineffectiveness of poetry once its zone of autonomy has been compromised by force and domination:

Yes, that was the story; but what can music do  
Against the weapons of soldiers? When eagles come,  
Tell me what doves can possibly do about it?  
If the raven on the left in this hollow oak  
Hadn't warned me not to resist, I might have been killed.  
Menalcas himself might very well have been killed. (IX, 71-73)

The poet-shepherd in this situation has one ally left: the raven, an agent of nature, saves his life by preaching passive non-resistance. The harmony with nature established by the shepherds' poetic praxis thus provides a slim margin of security against the depredations of the political. But Eclogue IX principally evokes the profound anxiety of the poet who, while central to the Arcadian economy of aesthetic play, is in the "real world" as marginal a figure politically as he is economically. Arcadia is haunted by Plato's banishment of poets from the ideal *polis*: in a sense it accedes to that banishment, but the ideal *socius* it sets up is a provocation to the *polis* that rejects it and regards it with amused tolerance at best. The tension between the perfection of the pastoral economy (derived from a fantastic relation to nature) and the pathos of its politics (derived from the relative weakness of its social imagination) is part of the ironic framework or rhetorical situation that must be acknowledged in the

reading of any pastoral text. As Annabel Paterson remarks in her book *Pastoral and Ideology*, “what people think of Virgil’s *Eclogues* is a key to their own cultural assumptions, because the text was so structured as to provoke, consciously or unconsciously, an ideological response.”<sup>5</sup> It is the *weakness* of the pastoral fantasy—the palpable contradictions visible within the text’s economic and political visions, as well as the contradiction between Arcadia and the reader’s reality—that provokes that ideological response and which has made it possible for readers throughout the centuries to see the *Eclogues* as both a critique and a eulogy for Roman power. What Adorno calls “velleity” maintains pastoral’s capacity for critical negativity, a negativity that derives from its *failure* to convince as utopian representation. Its positives—the images of leisure, spontaneous production, modest consumption, and aesthetic play, all based on the primary image of harmony with the rhythms of the natural world—negate not only the horrors of repression and exploitation but themselves, by failing to add up to a coherent totality in the manner of a full-blown utopia. Pastoral becomes a subtle critical instrument for exposing both the master ideology of a culture and the ideologies of systematic critiques of that culture. Yet weak as it is, the dialectical image of the green world is perpetually before our eyes, never entirely negating itself while forbidding its own literalization.

## ***2. The Nature of Modernism***

A theory of twentieth-century avant-pastoral may be evolved from a dialectical reading of two major modernist philosophers, Heidegger and Adorno, whose critiques of capitalist modernity intersect at the point of their fiercest opposition, their politics.

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<sup>5</sup> For a nuanced discussion of pastoral in the context of American literature and its capacity to support or oppose dominant ideologies, see the chapter “Pastoral Ideology” in Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995): 31-52.

The reactionary politics of Heidegger can not and should not be reconciled with Adorno's critical Marxism. Yet there are notable similarities in their critiques of what Heidegger calls "the age of the world-picture" and what Adorno and Max Horkheimer term "the administered world," even if their political stances might be characterized as Jan Rosiek has done as "right-wing agrarian conservatism" on the one hand and "left-wing cosmopolitan modernism" on the other (xxii). These definitions emphasize the conflict that is most pertinent to my attempt to put these thinkers in dialogue with each other: Heidegger may be said to construct a theory of a poetic relation to nature whose vision of the social is quietist where it is not actually reactionary and pernicious, while Adorno comes out of a tradition of Critical Theory that sees nature-as-a-value as either irrelevant or a threat to the project of utopia. This fundamental conflict is illustrated in an essay by John P. McCormick, in which Heidegger's "genealogical" nostalgia for nature is portrayed as one of the dangerous myths that Adorno and Horkheimer sought to dialectically subvert. "The Enlightenment must examine itself, if men are not to be wholly betrayed. The task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past. Today, however, the past is preserved as the destruction of the past" (quoted in McCormick 274). Utopian "redemption" is pitted against "conservation," the latter ethic being precisely what ecocritical readings of Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology" attempt to retrieve from his conservatism. For McCormick, however, Heidegger's concern for nature stems from blindness to economic realities and comes at an unacceptable political cost, as in this summary of the thrust of Heidegger's essay:

For Heidegger, the forcible extraction and storage of nature's energy is the dangerous or threatening aspect of modern technology. He even describes this danger in terms of capitalism, and points to this as the specific characteristic that separates modern technology from previous

ones. But Heidegger does not understand that this “extracting and storing” (*herausgefördert und gespeichert*) in terms of the accumulation of surplus value extracted from human labor, but rather as the “energy” (*Energie*) extracted from nature. Nature is the victim of technology to be redeemed in Heidegger’s scheme, not humanity, as in Adorno and Horkheimer’s. It can not be emphasized enough that “nature” is *not* an unqualified good for Adorno and Horkheimer, but rather the source of unrationalized domination—a domination not unlike that which Heidegger politically endorsed. I leave aside for another time the notorious equivalences that Heidegger asserts between contemporary farming practices, death camps, and military blockades in the lecture version of the essay that would further amplify these points. (275, italics in original)

However, what appears to be the straightforwardly Marxian separation McCormick draws here between energy and surplus value, or between nature and human labor, seems questionable in light of the young Marx’s own remarks about the basic oneness of human beings and nature:

Just as plants, animals, stones, the air, light, etc., constitute a part of human consciousness in the realm of theory, partly as objects of natural science, partly as objects of art—his spiritual inorganic nature, spiritual nourishment which he must first prepare to make it palatable and digestible—so too in the realm of practice they constitute a part of human life and human activity. Physically man lives only on these products of nature, whether they appear in the form of food, heating, clothes, a dwelling, or whatever it may be. The universality of man is in practice manifested precisely in the universality which makes all nature

his *inorganic* body—both inasmuch as nature is (1) his direct means of life, and (2) the material, the object, and the instrument of his life-activity. Nature is man’s *inorganic body*—nature, that is, in so far as it is not itself the human body. Man *lives* on nature—means that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous intercourse if he is not to die. That man’s physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature. (*Marx-Engels Reader* 61, italics in original)

Marx’s anthropocentrism may be dubious from an ecocritical perspective, but the notion of nature as an extension of the human body is a fluid and reversible one. At the very least, this passage from the *Economic and Political Manuscripts of 1844* makes it possible for a discussion of nature to seem intrinsic to discussions about human life and freedom in a Marxian context. Furthermore, in spite of McCormick’s scathing and understandable disdain for Heidegger’s conflation of mechanized agriculture with the Nazi death camps, I feel that he misses the larger point: that the exploitative forces of technology do not distinguish between natural resources and “human resources.” Human beings are part of the single organism that is nature—in Marx’s analogy, they are its mind or spirit and external nature is its body—and both body and mind are ruthlessly exploited and colonized by the productive forces that Heidegger hypostasizes as “technology.” McCormick’s reading of nature is even more anthropocentric than Marx’s, so that he regards the word itself with suspicion as an apology for “naturalized domination,” which in the case of Fascism is the systematic reproduction of the originary spontaneous fear of nature (288). Nature as such vanishes in the dialectic between primitive man’s domination *by* nature (mediated only by “magical” practices in service to hegemonic social relations) and the domination *of* nature, which abstractly reinscribes patterns of oppression: “Enlightenment dissolves

away the injustice of the old inequality of unmediated mastery, but at the same time perpetuates it in universal mediation, by relating every existing thing to ever other” (DoE 8). The idea of justice, though not achieved in the primitive world constituted by the struggle to dominate nature, vanishes into equivalence in the world where enlightenment rationality has succeeded in that project: “Justice gives way to law” (DoE 12). It is the fatal separation between ambitions for human liberation and the notion of a just and harmonious relation to nature that pastoral wish-fulfillment seeks to blur, perhaps erase. But in order to do this some notion of actual or “first nature” in the context of human relations (“second nature”) needs to be recovered.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s view of the human relation to nature is bleak on its face: “What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts” (DoE 2). The modern idea of nature derives from the history of human emancipation from nature’s terrors, by which a subjectivity standing outside and opposed to the amorphous *chora* of nature could emerge. But under enlightenment this emancipation has become its own prison: “The self, entirely encompassed by civilization, is dissolved in an element composed of the very inhumanity which civilization has sought from the first to escape” (DoE 24). Nature as such and the pre-enlightenment human responses to it—mimesis, myth, metaphysics—are repudiated in favor of a thoroughly bourgeois concept of “naturalness” which, as McCormick has observed, conceals relations of domination. The Adornian objection to Heidegger might thus be summarized as an accusation that Heidegger’s “thinking” is nothing more than nostalgia for pre-enlightenment modes of cognition. Yet Adorno’s commitment to enlightenment is matched by his commitment to its self-critique, which the cognitive mode he calls “mimesis” can be made to serve. His attitude toward nature is more complex than McCormick’s essay suggests. In *Aesthetic Theory*, a version of pastoral becomes discernible in Adorno’s discussion of

the authentic modernist artwork's relation to another pair of "natures": "first nature" and "second nature":

Delight in nature was bound up with the conception of the subject as being-for-itself and virtually infinite in itself; as such the subject projected itself onto nature and in its isolation felt close to it; the subject's powerlessness in a society petrified into a second nature becomes the motor of the flight in a purportedly first nature. In Kant, as a result of the subject's consciousness of freedom, the fear of nature's force began to become anachronistic; this consciousness of freedom, however, gave way to the subject's anxiety in the face of perennial unfreedom. In the experience of natural beauty, consciousness of freedom and anxiety fuse. (AT 65)

The relative security of the bourgeois subject in the face of nature as theorized by Kant makes the positive enjoyment of "first nature," which was a source of terror to primitive man, possible. This mirrors the precarious situation of the pastoral shepherd, whose vulnerability to nature's terrors is mitigated by the Arcadian topos, a kind of "magic circle" representative of the situation of artworks in general:

Art has in common with magic the postulation of a special, self-contained sphere removed from the context of profane existence. Within it special laws prevail. Just as the sorcerer begins the ceremony by marking out from all its surroundings the place in which the sacred forces are to come into play, each work of art is closed off from reality by its own circumference. The very renunciation of external effects by which art is distinguished from magical sympathy binds art only more deeply to the heritage of magic. This renunciation places the pure

image in opposition to corporeal existence, the elements of which the image sublates within itself. (DoE 13-14)

Arcadia functions as an artwork insofar as it renounces external effects but remains a negative image of the civilization it withdraws from. But the pastoral withdrawal is not a perfect protection from civilization, any more than its withdrawal from first nature as a source of terror can be perfect (as witnessed by Erwin Panofsky's famous interpretation of Poussin's *Les Bergers d'Arcadie*<sup>6</sup>). The shepherd remains vulnerable to the caprices of power even as he escapes the social unfreedom that congeals into "second nature"; in contemplating his escape the reader's "consciousness of freedom and anxiety [may] fuse."

Adorno's use of the terms "first nature" and "second nature" derives from his reading of Georg Lukács, who distinguishes between nature as "the aggregate of systems of the laws' governing what happens" and the conception of nature as "*a value concept*" (Lukács 136, italics in original). Both of the natures under discussion here fall into the latter category:

[The value concept of nature] concentrates increasingly on the feeling that social institutions (reification) strip man of his human essence and that the more culture and civilisation (i.e. capitalism and reification) take possession of him, the less able he is to be a human being. And with a reversal of meanings that never becomes apparent, nature becomes the repository of all these inner tendencies opposing the growth of mechanisation, dehumanisation and reification.

Nature thereby acquires the meaning of what has grown organically, what was not created by man, in contrast to the artificial

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<sup>6</sup> Panofsky's argument finds death to be a manifestation of what I am calling "first nature" that even Arcadians cannot overcome. The prevalence of the genre of pastoral elegy is another reminder of this.

structures of human civilisation. But, at the same time, it can be understood as that aspect of human inwardness which has remained natural, or at least tends or longs to become natural once more. “They are what we once were,” says Schiller of the forms of nature, “they are what we should once more become.” (136)

For Lukács, nature as a *positive* value is named as the “first nature” located in “what has grown organically”<sup>7</sup> and the primeval, pastoral past implied by the Schiller quotation. “Second nature,” by contrast, is a negative concept associated with the creation of “natural” laws whose apparent naturalness conceals the “madness” of the human environment: “man in capitalist society confronts a reality ‘made’ by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its ‘law’” (135). This ideology of reification emerges from a dialectical struggle between first and second nature:

For, on the one hand, men are constantly smashing, replacing and leaving behind them the “natural,” irrational and actually existing bonds, while, on the other hand, they erect around themselves in the reality they have created and “made,” a kind of second nature which evolves with exactly the same inexorable necessity as was the case earlier on with irrational forces of nature (more exactly: the social relations which appear in this form). “To them, their own social action,” says Marx, “takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them.” (128)

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<sup>7</sup> The use of the terms “organic” (by Lukács) and “nonorganic” (by Marx) to mean basically the same thing is an unfortunate source of confusion. I take Marx’s “nonorganic nature” to mean all nature that is external to the human being and his body: that which is capable of being an object to human subjects. Lukács’ “organic nature” is distinguished from Marx’s inorganic nature only in the way it is perceived: as that which is *not* or *not yet* an object for human manipulation, the contemplation of which provides a means for the imagination to negate “the artificial structures of human civilisation.”

Here is another way of describing the dialectic of enlightenment whereby the tool that smashes myth becomes myth in its own right. But “first nature” and “second nature” are not synonymous with myth and enlightenment, respectively. The recovery of first nature may take the form of a mythic fantasy, but as a fantasy or image it retains a recognizably mythical character. The *image* of nature (or as Adorno would have it, “natural beauty”), retains the possibility of having a critical, negative relation to second nature without the possibility of renewing myth—that is, of becoming the new dominant ideology:

According to the canon of universal concepts [natural beauty] is undefinable precisely because its own concept has its substance in what withdraws from universal conceptuality. Its essential indeterminateness is manifest in the fact that every part of nature, as well as everything made by man that has congealed into nature, is able to become beautiful, luminous from within. (AT 70)

This Kantian formulation of the conceptual indeterminacy of natural beauty becomes the aporetic center of its critical capacity; the conceptless universal through which the experience of natural beauty transcends what the guilty artwork cannot escape is a void for rational thought. For Adorno, poetry comes closest to natural beauty not when it represents the beautiful, but when it discovers language’s extraconceptual capacity—that is, its materiality:

For language is itself something double. Through its configurations it assimilates itself completely into subjective impulses; one would almost think it had produced them. But at the same time language remains the medium of concepts, remains that which establishes an inescapable relationship to the universal and to society. Hence the highest lyric works are those in which the subject, with no remaining

trace of mere matter, sounds forth in language until language itself acquires a voice. The unself-consciousness of the subject submitting itself to language as to something objective, and the immediacy and spontaneity of that subject's expression are one and the same: thus language mediates lyric poetry and society in their innermost core. This is why the lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime in with society, when it communicates nothing, when, instead, the subject whose expression is successful reaches an accord with language itself, with the inherent tendency of language. ("Lyric Poetry" 43)

The utopian power of the "highest lyric" extends beyond the aesthetic because it offers the hope that language might become as universal and as capable of illumination from within as nature: language *as* nature, regarded aesthetically, becomes a language beyond any person or class's particular *interest*. Frederic Jameson has pointed out that the *écriture blanc* of Robbe-Grillet and Camus as theorized by Roland Barthes has its own utopian valence, posited by Barthes as an alternative to Sartre's endorsement of "the proletariat as the last class": "Sartre had shown in his book [*What Is Literature?*] that the necessary restrictions of all literary languages to the 'signals' of local or limited (nonuniversal) groups or publics made all literary practices, in the world as we know it, the symbolic endorsement of the class violence of this or that group against the others" ("Pleasure" 68). Rather than resort as Sartre did to the proletariat as the only "local" group with a chance at producing a new universal class, Barthes sought to create a writing that effaced all traces of the local:

Barthes then ingeniously imagined a rather different way of escaping from the "nightmare of history," from the collective guilt inherent in the practice of any of the literary signs as such. Ironically, the whitest

writing always slowly turned into a literary institution and a practice of literary signs in its own right, over time: Barthes' contemporaneous example, Camus, no longer looks very neutral to us today, nor do the later practitioners of the then *nouveau roman*. ("Pleasure" 68)

The "local" that is the stumbling block for Sartre and Barthes is a more historical and precise way of describing the false reconciliation with late capitalism that Adorno feared that any representation of things as they are would inevitably lead to. Reconciliation for any single class means oppression for the others: the inevitably local and particular velleity of pastoral fantasy concretizes as a violence that does not even have the dubious redemptive quality of revolution.

It might be instructive at this point to take a closer look at Sartre and the kind of writing—poetry—whose utopian potential he denies precisely because of its "whiteness." For Sartre, poetry is utopian in the pejorative sense: pretty, but impossible. It has no use, which is its glory and its downfall. What's strange about his view of poetry is how completely it effaces the place of subjectivity; the poet is alienated from the language he writes: "He approached [words] with a completely fruitful feeling of strangeness. They were no longer his; they were no longer he; but in those strange mirrors, the sky, the earth, and his own life were reflected. And finally, they became things themselves, or rather the black heart of things" (Sartre 16). The reader is in a chiasmic relation with the poet's feelings, so that his or her subjectivity becomes as alienated and unmovable from the "thingness" of the poem as the poet is. The poet is in a transcendental position regarding language, but this has the same effect as putting him in a subaltern position: outside reality "on the other side of the human condition, on the side of God":

If this is the case, one easily understands how foolish it would be to require a poetic engagement. Doubtless emotion, even passion—and

why not anger, social indignation, and political hatred?—are at the origin of the poem. But they are not *expressed* there, as in a pamphlet or in a confession. Insofar as the writer of prose exhibits feelings, he illustrates them; whereas, if the poet injects his feelings into his poem, he ceases to recognize them; the words take hold of them, penetrate them, and metamorphose them; they do not signify them, even in his eyes. Emotion has become thing; it now has the opacity of things; it is compounded by the ambiguous properties of all the vocables in which it has been enclosed. And above all, there is always much more in each phrase, in each verse, as there is more than simple anguish in the yellow sky over Golgotha. The word, the phrase-thing, inexhaustible as things, everywhere overflows the feeling which has produced them. How can one hope to provoke the indignation or the political enthusiasm of the reader when the very thing one does is to withdraw him from the human condition and invite him to consider with the eyes of God a language that has been turned inside out? (18-19, italics in original)

What exceeds the poet's intention here—the inexhaustible “thingness” of the poem—is for Adorno an index of the work's authenticity and truth content: “What these works say is not what their words say. In art's intentionless language the mimetic impulses are bequeathed to the whole, which synthesizes them” (AT 184). For words to “overflow the feeling which has produced them” is to say more than they say: this surplus beyond meaning, which for Sartre registers as meaninglessness, is the result of the objectivation of the mimetic impulse, that which imitates nature rather than rationally dominates it (though as Adorno and Horkheimer show, primitive mimesis also sought domination). The foregrounding of words as “vocables”—their

materiality as signifiers—estranges them from the possibility of bearing any “message” within what Sartre calls “the total enterprise of living” (35). For Sartre, prose is a complex and flexible instrument for a political purpose in the world, manipulated by the same kind of theoretical cognition implicit in Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of language as sign: “As sign, language must resign itself to being calculation and, to know nature, must renounce the claim to resemble it.” Sartrean poetry would be a realm of pure mimesis, the word as nonsemantic image: “As image it must resign itself to being a likeness and, to be entirely nature, must renounce the claim to know it” (DoE 13). The utopian possibilities of a poetry dominated by mimesis, in which the play of the signifier is privileged over reference, only exist for Adorno because of the rational critical discourse that can dialecticize the hermetic or *blanc* poem. But the overwhelming presence of mimesis in such a poem (as opposed to other components in the unity of the artwork such as semblance and articulation) speaks to a kind of textuality that is “entirely nature,” suggesting a correspondence between the discernible content of a hermetic poem like Stefan George’s “Im windes-weben” and its stripped and thingly “form.”<sup>8</sup>

So “nature” returns as the positive content of an artwork that both Adorno and Barthes prefer to define in terms of its negativity. When considering the modernist artwork in general, it is the human enclave of “precapitalist nature” that is of overwhelming importance to Adorno: reconciliation with outer nature can only come when human beings reconcile with their own inner natures. One form that this might

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<sup>8</sup> A curious mirror image to Sartre’s conception of the poem as intentionless (as opposed to a prose of calculation) is Bakhtin’s belief, equally marginalizing to poetry as a genre, that poetic language is nothing *but* intention: “The poet must assume a complete single-personed hegemony over his own language, he must assume equal responsibility for each one of its aspects and subordinate them to his own, and only his own, intentions. Each word must express the poet’s *meaning* directly and without mediation; there must be no distance between the poet and his word” (297, italics in original). Bakhtin, who privileges the dialogic novel as the art form with most access to truth, is thus closer to Adorno’s idea of the dialectical unfolding of the artwork through critique than he is to Sartre’s hegemonic notion of prose.

take is suggested by Adorno's discussion in *Minima Moralia* of Freud's subordination of the pleasure principle; there, he accuses Freud of being caught up in the dialectic of enlightenment, unable to embrace what should be the base to the psychoanalytic rational superstructure: pleasure.

Reason is for him a mere superstructure. . . because he rejects the end, remote to meaning, impervious to reason, which alone could prove the means, reason, to be reasonable: pleasure. Once this has been disparagingly consigned to the repertoire of tricks for preserving the species, and so itself exposed as a cunning form of reason, without consideration of that moment in pleasure which transcends subservience to nature, *ratio* is degraded to rationalization. Truth is abandoned to relativity and people to power. He alone who could situate utopia in blind somatic pleasure, which, satisfying the ultimate intention, is intentionless, has a stable and valid idea of truth. (MM 61)

The mysterious "moment in pleasure which transcends subservience to nature" hints at the rhythmical balance between human needs and the needs of nature that is one of the premises of pastoral. More significant is Adorno's insistence on a utopia centered in sensual gratification, which suggests a synthesis of the first enclave of nature, the unconscious, with the second, insofar as Jameson's "precapitalist agriculture and village culture" suggests a world without the division of labor (though it does not preclude scarcity). Now, Adorno of all people is no primitivist. But "somatic pleasure" requires two kinds of accommodation with nature: an abundance of material goods and the ability to enjoy them with a minimum of repression. It is therefore significant that a fantasy of precapitalist agriculture and village life should be the suggested field of action of the sample poems Adorno provides in "On Lyric Poetry and Society." These poems posit the enjoyment of nature as the referential antithesis to capitalist

society, just as a thingly language exceeding conscious intention should provide the antithesis to that society's discourse of instrumentalization. The two kinds of nature, inner and outer, and their projected reconciliation reveal a specifically pastoral dimension to Adorno's conception of utopia as revealed by the artwork. Not that utopia and pastoral are equivalents: utopia takes the form of a total critique and its realization means the complete overthrow of the existing order. Pastoral is more modest, conservative in the truest sense: it seeks to preserve an image of the two interlinked enclaves of "Nature" that Jameson recognizes are in danger of disappearing entirely. Of course the Third World with its harsh economic and political realities has been decreasingly the site of pastoral fantasy since the time that "Third World" came into existence as a category for describing the poorest, least developed nations. But Arcadia is as imaginary as the Third World is, albeit from a different direction; whereas the Third World is primarily an administrative category, Arcadia is the remote setting imagined produced by the desire to be free from the spirit of administration. Pastoral fantasy as a dialectical opposite to technological administration—as seen in the old trope of the country versus the city—only functions when the country is not recognized as the site of advanced agricultural capitalism that it has become in the developed countries, as Raymond Williams has observed. As fantasy, it functions to obscure economic and political realities when used to overlay a real topography. In the hands of an avant-garde, however, pastoral may appear as an impulse to preserve the threatened space of "nature," both for its (utopian) potential for opposition and its own somatically pleasurable sake.

Artworks, particularly verbal artworks, can never entirely escape the guilt of speaking for one language and one class; but by imitating natural beauty it becomes possible for art to have the allegorical force of a utopian representation without being confined to a single "master" reading: "Under its optic, art is not the imitation of

nature but the imitation of natural beauty. It develops in tandem with the allegorical intention that manifests it without deciphering it; in tandem with meanings that are not objectified as in significative language” (AT 71). Note that the artwork’s imitation of natural beauty here is not necessarily the *representation* of natural beauty; the imitation of natural beauty’s aconceptuality comes through the medium of a non-significative language which may nonetheless take the form of language (Sartre’s “thing-phrases”). The important thing is natural beauty’s image-character, whether or not those images are derived from signifiers or other media (painting, sculpture, music, etc.). Adorno implies that the more “poetic” the artwork is (the higher its lyricism, to adopt his language from the “Lyric Poetry and Society” essay), the more closely it participates in the imitation of nature that he elsewhere calls “mimesis”:

As its prose character intensifies, art extricates itself completely from myth and thus from the spell of nature, which nevertheless continues in the subjective domination of nature. Only what had escaped nature as fate would help nature to its restitution. The more that art is thoroughly organized as an object by the subject and divested of the subject’s intentions, the more articulately does it speak according to the model of a nonconceptual, non-rigidified significative language; this would perhaps be the same language that is inscribed in what the sentimental age gave the beautiful its threadbare name, “The Book of Nature.” (AT 66-67)

From this we may surmise that art that intensifies its “poetic character” rather than its “prose character” is art that manages to somehow be “thoroughly organized as an object by the subject”; yet that object is “divested of the subject’s intentions.” (The “subject” in this case primarily refers to the artist, but appears to refer to the receiver of the artwork as well.) The relation of “poetic” art to the subject becomes similar to

the relation of natural beauty to the subject, whose perceptions (in Kantian terms, the faculty of aesthetic judgment) organize nature as perceivable, turning it into a landscape, without claiming the sovereignty over that landscape by which its meaning or productive function would be determined. Here the outlines of Bürger's "nonorganic" artwork become discernible: neither producer nor receiver nor the framework for those activities (art-as-institution) may assert the sovereignty of intention—that is, identity—over the artwork. What remains is the speaking of a "nonconceptual, non-rigidified significative language" that belongs to the artwork itself—a language that concretizes its nonidentity with the subject who wrote it or the subject that reads it. This is a description of mimesis as Adorno derives the concept from Walter Benajmin, who wrote about the "communicating muteness of things" (*Selected Writings* 70) in his important early essay, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man":

The life of man in the pure spirit of language was blissful. Nature, however, is mute.... After the Fall, however, when God's word curses the ground, the appearance of nature is deeply changed. Now begins its other muteness, which is what we mean by the "deep sadness of nature." It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language (though "to endow with language" is more than "to make able to speak"). This proposition has a double meaning. It means, first, that she would lament language itself. Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature (and for the sake of her redemption the life and language of *man*—not only, as is supposed—of the poet—are in nature). This proposition means, second, that she would lament. Lament, however, is the most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language. It contains scarcely more than the

sensuous breath; and even where there is only a rustling of plants, there is always a lament. Because she is mute, nature mourns. Yet the inversion of this proposition leads even further into the essence of nature; the sadness of nature makes her mute. In all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than the inability or disinclination to communicate. That which mourns feels itself thoroughly known by the unknowable. (72-73)

While Benjamin's orientation in this essay is more theological than Marxist-materialist, this passage forms part of the background for Adorno's idea of the "non-significative language" shared by nature and the most "poetic" artworks. For Benjamin, the fallenness of human language means that the things of nature are seized and known in a spirit of violation: they are "overnamed" rather than "cognized." He suggests that artworks, insofar as they participate in the non-significative, offer up a "communicating muteness" similar to nature's:

There is a language of sculpture, of painting, of poetry. Just as the language of poetry is partly, if not solely, founded on the name language of man, it is very conceivable that the language of sculpture or painting is founded on certain kinds of thing-languages, that in them we find a translation of the language of things into an infinitely higher language, which may still be of the same sphere. We are concerned here with nameless, nonacoustic languages, languages issuing from matter; here we should recall the material community of things in their communication. (73)

Benjamin here emphasizes a distinction between "the name language of man" that constitutes poetry and "languages issuing from matter," a language immanent to things that human beings can nonetheless hear, and which they answer with a name. The

“name language of man” is for Benjamin language as it is appropriate to human beings and their nature as the creatures of God, the ultimate Namer. and is purer than “fallen” language: “In stepping outside the purer language of name, man makes language a means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to him), and therefore also, in one part at any rate, a *mere* sign; and this later results in the plurality of languages” (71, italics in original). The language of appropriate naming does not fall into “mere” signification: “Man communicates himself to God through name, which he gives to nature and (in proper names) to his own kind; and to nature he gives names according to the communication that he receives from her, for the whole of nature, too, is imbued with a nameless, unspoken language, the residue of the creative word of God, which is preserved in man as the cognizing name and above man as the judgment suspended over him” (74). Naming is an action of human language that responds to nature’s silent “communication”; it is a paradisaal language that creates a horizontal relation of recognition between humans and nature as fellow creatures. The language of the Fall, by contrast, does not participate in this immanence: it creates an artificial distance between humans and things, including the material thingness of language itself:

The knowledge to which the snake seduces, that of good and evil, is nameless. It is vain in the deepest sense, and this very knowledge is itself the only evil known to the paradisiacal state. Knowledge of good and evil abandons name; it is a knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word. Name steps outside itself in this knowledge: the fall marks the birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language, the language of knowledge, from what we may call its own immanent magic, in order to become expressly, as it were externally, magic. The

word must communicate *something* (other than itself). In that fact lies the true Fall of the spirit of language. (71, italics in original)

The dream of a “scientific” language above all Babel—which after Heidegger we can recognize as a *technological* language, perhaps even the language of technology itself—is for Benjamin the ultimate hubris of the fallen language of good and evil. He wishes to preserve what we might call the “middle” language of man as namer, who names in order to imitate the action of creation. This middle language is mimesis, “the gift of producing similarities” (*Reflections* 333) which is the action of nature in man, as the first sentence of Benjamin’s late essay, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” makes clear: “Nature creates similarities” (333). But human beings are the most adept imitators, and the importance of the mimetic faculty may be seen its implied ethical dimension: “His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else” (333). It may well be that, as for Adorno and Horkheimer, mimesis is a linguistic mode born of fear: “The cry of terror called forth by the unfamiliar becomes its name” (DoE 10). Yet there is an implicit ethical dimension to the “compulsion” behind mimesis, since it suggests a willingness to recognize and even become the Other. For Benjamin, the significance of nature and the similarities it creates lies in the stimulation of the mimetic faculty in humans: “these natural correspondences are given their true importance only if seen as stimulating and awakening the mimetic faculty in man” (*Reflections* 333). However, modernity has brought about “the increasing decay of the mimetic faculty. For clearly the observable world of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples. The question is whether we are concerned with the decay of this faculty or with its transformation” (334). Benjamin’s essay only provides the barest hint as to what a “transformation” of the mimetic

faculty might look like. He turns to language as a “canon” or “archive” for “the meaning of nonsensuous similarity” (the phrase “nonsensuous similarity” seems to recall “the communicating muteness of things” of his earlier essay). Nonsensuous similarity is described as the force that binds signifier to signified, and even signifier to signifier: “it is nonsensuous similarity that establishes the ties not only between the spoken and the signified but also between the written and the signified, and equally between the spoken and the written” (335). This similarity can be glimpsed in a manner similar to graphology, which “has taught us to recognize in handwriting images that the unconscious of the writer conceals in it.” But it is primarily seen as a kind of flicker between the semiotic (the signified) and scripted (the signifier) dimensions of language:

This aspect of language as script, however, does not develop in isolation from its other, semiotic aspect. Rather, the mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. This bearer is the semiotic element. Thus the coherence of words or sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears. For its production by man—like its perception by him—is in many cases, and particularly the most important, limited to flashes. It flits past. (335)

From this it seems that translation would be the linguistic activity that comes closest to revealing the essence of language as a repository for nonsensuous similarity. But the importance of the mimetic faculty is of a piece with its ancient, primordial quality: it is what makes it possible “‘To read what was never written’” (336)—the language of what Adorno calls “The Book of Nature.” This capacity has vanished into language: “language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier

powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic” (336). Adorno and Horkheimer do not lament the liquidation of magic and the patterns of domination it serves to inscribe. Yet the entire thrust of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is against the mythic or magical domination that enlightenment rationality, which should be humanity’s weapon against domination, has become in the twentieth century. Adorno is highly critical of Benjamin’s predilection for “magic,”<sup>9</sup> just as he is scathing about what he sees as the tendency toward a mythic “jargon of authenticity” in Heidegger and his followers. He nonetheless sees that artworks might provide a refuge for the action of mimesis as a mode of cognition that does not seek to possess or dominate its object, but instead enters into a condition of openness toward it—a mode of the utopia of non-identity, which is in turn a form of reconciliation between man and nature. Adorno is famously pessimistic about the ability of artworks to actually achieve this, and it is this pessimism in large part that puts him on the modernist end of the modernism/avant-garde continuum. But there is still palpable in both his writings and Benjamin’s a place for *imagining* the recovery of the mimetic faculty. This fantasy constitutes the process of the pastoral, a fantasy which can be undertaken naively, as it most often is, or in the critical, open, and negative form that characterizes the avant-pastoral.

It is now possible to discern the outlines of the pastoral “form of life” represented by Adorno’s conception of natural beauty and the mimetic relation it demands from the observer. As an image, natural beauty can never be the object of human labor, much less that of theoretical contemplation—only the aesthetic judgment that pleases in the absence of a concept and has no stake in the object’s existence: “For [natural beauty], nature is exclusively appearance, never the stuff of labor and the

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<sup>9</sup> [Quote from letter to Benjamin re; Arcades Project]

reproduction of life, let alone the substratum of science. Like the experience of art, the aesthetic experience of nature is that of images. Nature, as appearing beauty, is not perceived as an object of action” (65). Without objectification in either the theoretical or practical senses the subject experiencing natural beauty gets a glimpse of a utopia defined by the absence of domination—though *as* a utopia it risks taking on the mythic character that Adorno is wary of reifying:

That the experience of natural beauty, at least according to its subjective consciousness, is entirely distinct from the domination of nature, as if the experience were at one with the primordial origin, marks out both the strength and the weakness of the experience: its strength, because it recollects a world without domination, one that probably never existed; its weakness, because through this recollection it dissolves back into that amorphousness out of which genius once arose and for the first time because conscious of the idea of freedom that could be realized in a world free from domination. The anamnesis of freedom in natural beauty deceives because it seeks freedom in the old unfreedom. Natural beauty is myth transposed into the imagination and thus, perhaps, requited. (66)

The “old unfreedom” is that brought about by the primeval terror of nature, which is the origin of myth; therefore, to seek freedom in the experience of natural beauty is necessarily a self-deception. But it is important to remember that pastoral is not utopia: the pastoral world is not free of domination, but rather a space from which domination has been at best temporarily deferred. The partialness of the pastoral dispensation is what distinguishes it from utopian schemes. Arcadia exists as a zone of aesthetic enjoyment whose autonomy is always in doubt precisely because of its palpable semblance character: it *deceives openly* and so fails as reification. Its uncanny

quality results from the fact that as a particular form of artistic representation it imitates the action of artworks in general. Every artwork functions according to the process of an aesthetic mimesis that is instrumental cognition's other, even and especially those avant-garde artworks such as Beckett's that represent scenes of anomie and horror rather than those of natural beauty. The "image" of natural beauty emerges not in what Beckett represents in his novels and plays but in his stripped and deracinated language, which "develops in tandem with the allegorical intention that manifests it without deciphering it; in tandem with meanings that are not objectified as in significant language" (AT 71). Pastoral, however, is a necessarily failed attempt to *directly represent* the image of natural beauty that is the principle of authentic art; enlisted as a mode of avant-garde art it becomes a utopian representation whose critical negativity derives from the fragmented incompleteness of its representation. That is why criticisms of pastoral's conventionality and falseness will always be beside the point. Mimesis is both its means of becoming and its *subject*. As such, pastoral writing can never actually *be* "The Book of Nature," but its every gesture expresses Schiller's yearning: *They are* (Arcadia's inhabitants, its shepherds and animals) *what we* (the civilized writer/reader, the practitioner of mimesis) once were; they are what we should once more *become*. Schiller's is a call to imitation not of external nature, but of the autonomy of its otherness that its image suggests: the mimesis *of* mimesis.

The form of pastoral then is that of the *ars poetica*; but the Greek essence of that *ars* is more *physis* than *techne*—or rather, the mimetic *techne* of pastoral attempts to imitate the action of *physis*. In Heidegger's thought, the middle term between *physis* and *techne* would appear to be *poiesis*, the making associated with the craftsman that assists *physis*. Both *physis* and *poiesis* are archaic modes of being or being-production, as Hubert Dreyfus has summarized them:

He distinguished roughly six epochs in our changing understanding of being. First things were understood on the model of wild nature as *physis*, i.e. as springing forth on their own. Then on the basis of *poesis*, or nurturing, things were dealt with as needing to be helped to come forth. This was followed by an understanding of things as finished works, which in turn led to the understanding of all beings as *creatures* produced by a creator God. This religious world gave way to the modern one in which everything was organized to stand over against and satisfy the desires of autonomous and stable subjects. In 1950, Heidegger claimed, that we were entering a final epoch which he called *the technological understanding of being*. (“Highway Bridges and Feasts”, no page number)

There is a sense in which, under the technological conditions of modernity, “pastoral” may refer to nostalgia for any of the preceding five “epochs.” However, it is the question of an accommodation to nature in its most originary form, *physis*, that guides Heidegger’s thinking about art as that which sets up a world. To that end, the ambiguous Greek word *techne* (which encompasses almost any sort of “know-how” or *savoir-faire*) is adapted to describe a trans-historical mode of being that only under the conditions of modernity (“the technological understanding of being”) has become an end in itself, organizing for the sake of organizing and not for the benefit of any given subjects or objects. Against technology Heidegger holds out a pastoral hope for the artwork as that which preserves a place for *physis*:

. . . *techne* signifies neither craft nor art, and not at all the technical in our present-day sense; it never means a kind of practical performance....

The artist is a *technites* not because he is also a craftsman, but because both the setting forth of works and the setting forth of equipment occur in a bringing forth and presenting that causes beings in the first place to come forward and be present in assuming an appearance. Yet all this happens in the midst of the being that grows out of its own accord, *phusis*. Calling art *techne* does not at all imply that the artist's action is seen in the light of craft. What looks like craft in the creation of a work is of a different sort. This doing is determined and pervaded by the nature of creation, and indeed remains contained with that creating. (PLT 59-60)

The pastoral nature of this kind of artistic creation—or rather, the presencing of artistic creation that appears in the nature of pastoral—is reinforced by Heidegger's view of the artwork as a mode of revealing, *aletheia*. The artist is not a craftsperson but someone who brings forth things that appear as if they were *of nature*: his process of creation imitates the process of natural beauty's appearing. In its broadest sense as an artifact of human culture, the artwork is what makes it possible for an amorphous and terrifying nature to appear as natural beauty:

The steadfastness of the work contrasts with the surge of the surf, and its own repose brings out the raging of the sea. Tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter into their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are. The Greeks early called this emerging and rising in itself and in all things *phusis*. It clears and illuminates, also, that on which and in which man bases his dwelling. We call this ground the *earth*. What this word says is not to be associated with the idea of a mass of matter deposited somewhere, or with the merely astronomical idea of a planet. Earth is that whence the

arising brings back and shelters everything that arises without violation.

In the things that arise, earth is present as the sheltering agent.” (42)

The appearing that the artwork makes possible depends on its “thingness”—which is revealed or “said” by the artist rather than produced (production is for Heidegger the “bad” aspect of *techne* that reveals itself as “technology”)—through a process with strong affinities to Benjamin’s mimesis. Heidegger’s thinking about “things” begins with the *sufficiency* of the natural thing, such as a block of granite—a self-sufficiency imitated by the artwork (29). Ordinarily we relate to things by “assaulting” them with “thing-concepts” (25), which take various forms: the propositional assembly of the thing’s “characteristics”; a phenomenological bracketing of all such characteristics in favor of an abstract, purely sensory experience; or viewing the thing as a matter-form structure, something made for a purpose. Opposed to these versions of instrumental rationality, Heidegger posits the approach to cognition that he calls “thinking” or *Gelassenheit*: letting the thing be:

[O]nly one element is needful: to keep at a distance all the preconceptions and assaults of the above modes of thought, to leave the thing to rest in its own self, for instance, in its thing-being. What seems easier than to let a being be just the being that it is? Or does this turn out to be the most difficult of tasks, particularly is such an intention—to let a being be as it is—represents the opposite of the indifference that simply turns its back upon the being itself in favor of an unexamined concept of being? We ought to turn toward the being, think about it in regard to its being, but by means of this thinking at the same time let it rest upon itself in its very own being. (31)

While not identical to mimesis, Heideggerian “thinking” shares with it the crucial quality of being a form of cognitive mediation that does not convert its object

into a concept; that is, it lets its *object* remain a *thing*. “Thinking” is poetic cognition, and the scene that Heidegger imagines for that cognition is a pastoral one, as a glance at his own poem, “The Thinker as Poet,” reveals. Each page of aphoristic meditation on the nature of “thinking” and “thinking’s saying” is preceded by an image of natural beauty: “When the little windwheel outside / the cabin window sings in the / gathering thunderstorm . . .” (PLT 5); “When in early summer lonely narcissi / bloom hidden in the meadow and the / rock-rose gleams under the maple . . .” (PLT 7). Through its presentation of images of natural beauty juxtaposed with aphoristic statement, Heidegger’s poem imitates the structure of the “non-significative language” (AT 71) that characterizes mimesis. He points toward poetry as a means of saying what “thinking” thinks, beyond the bounds of the instrumental rationality that governs knowledge and production:

When, in relation to beings in terms of representation and production, we relate ourselves at the same time by making propositional assertions, such a saying is not what is willed. Asserting remains a way and a means. By contrast, there is a saying that really engages in saying, yet without reflecting upon language, which would make even language into one more object. To be involved in saying is the mark of a saying that follows something to be said, solely in order to say it. What is to be said would then be what by nature belongs to the province of language. And that, thought metaphysically, is particular beings as a whole. Their wholeness is the intactness of the pure draft, the sound wholeness of the Open, in that it makes room within itself for man. (“What Are Poets For?,” PLT 137-38)

“The poet. . . designates beings as a whole with the names ‘Nature,’ ‘Life,’ ‘the Open,’ ‘the whole draft’” (122). Poetry reconciles beings *as* beings (“beings” is a

category that includes both things and humans [*Dasein*]) without rendering them as objects and subjects, and therefore opens them to reconciliation with nature. As opposed to the instrumental reasoning which turns both inner and outer nature into “natural resources” (“Where Nature is not satisfactory to man’s representation, he reframes or redispes it” [110]), poetry lets nature remain nature—or in Heidegger’s terminology, “earth”:

That into which the work sets itself back and which it causes to come forth in this setting back of itself we called the earth. Earth is that which comes forth and shelters. Earth, self-dependent, is effortless and untiring. Upon the earth and in it, historical man grounds his dwelling in a world. In setting up a world, the work sets forth the earth. This setting forth must be thought here in the strict sense of the word. The work moves the earth itself into the Open of a world and keeps it there.

*The work lets the earth be an earth.* (PLT 46, italics in original)

Every artwork, then, has its “environmental” dimension: nature is made to appear within the context of the human world, even if only negatively, as a palpable absence. We might then identify a pastoral artwork as one that sets up a world in which nature’s “grounding” of that world is thematized, generally through the representation of a natural environment. The pastoral artwork provides an image of another form of life, governed by the mimesis that is the ground of artmaking and indeed language itself.

The world represented in pastoral extends the principle of artistic mimesis into every dimension of life, supplanting or at least holding at bay the logic of production and domination, economics and politics. If we return for a moment to Virgil we will remember that the *Eclogues* imagine an alternative to labor as man’s principal way of relating to the natural world. In Arcadia it is a poetic logic in the form of song that mediates between nature and human beings. Tityrus “teach[es] the woods to echo

‘Amaryllis,’” (I, 3), while poetry supplements irrigation as a means of fostering agriculture: “the fields have drunk their fill of song” (III, 27). Both the rhythms of agricultural production (which already exists in a highly immediate form) and the natural order itself are determined by poetry rather than labor; the end of artistic play supplants the end of production:<sup>10</sup>

The Muse of the shepherds Alphisiboeus and Damon,  
At whose contending songs the very cattle  
Were spellbound in the field, forgetting to graze—  
The lynx was spellbound too, hearing the music—  
And the rivers, spellbound, stood still listening— (VIII, 61)

Poetry, by resembling nature, nurtures it, both in its outer and inner forms (or in Marx’s terms, “inorganic” external nature and the “organic” nature that is the human body):

Inspired poet, the song you sing is such  
As sleep must be to the weary on the grass  
Or cool brook water quenching the thirst of summer. (V, 39)

The reciprocity of mimesis in Arcadia is indicated on a number of levels, from the “oaten” composition of the pastoralist’s means of creating song to his animals’ alleged ability to take care of themselves while he chooses song over labor (VII, 53). Poetry and nature are united in mimesis, as is seen by how the poetic impulse manifests in the shepherds as a form of *physis*: in Eclogue VII the shepherds Corydon and Thyrsis are likened to “she-goats, / Their udders swollen with milk”:

Thyrsis and he  
Were both like flowers in bloom, the two of them,  
Arcadians both, and ready to compete  
With song replying to song replying to song. (VII, 53)

The naturalness of the shepherds is identical with their capacity for imitating the action of *physis*, which is in turn a mode of *Gelassenheit*: the *techne* of their song is subdued to its purported naturalness, swelling and blooming without their conscious

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<sup>10</sup> This is doubly true for the cited passage, in which Virgil has arbitrarily in imitation of Theocritus transplanted the lynx, which is not found in Italy, to his pastoral landscape. Poetic priorities overtake those of empirical observation, a skill which is on ample display in Virgil’s *Georgics*, but not here.

intervention. That this poetry is specifically Arcadian and not to be confused with poetry generally is shown by the Apollonian restrictions imposed on Tityrus at the beginning of Eclogue VI:

When I began to write, my Muse did not  
Disdain to play Sicilian games nor did  
She blush to live in the woods, and when I thought  
Of singing of kings and battles, the god Apollo  
Tweaked my ear and said to me, “A shepherd  
Should feed fat sheep and sing a slender song.”  
So now—since there are plenty to sing your praise  
And plenty to celebrate grim deeds of war—  
I’ll study how to play the pastoral reed  
And win the favor of the country Muse.  
I will not sing what I’m not supposed to sing. (VI, 45)

Apollo’s admonition creates a chiasmic relation between the “slender song” of the shepherd and the “fat sheep” he cares for, as though to abandon one would be to abandon the other. The “slender song” of the shepherd’s care is explicitly opposed to songs that “celebrate grim deeds of war”—the war of “historical work” in Adorno and Horkheimer’s sense that seeks “the realization of utopia through historical work” (DoE 49). That utopian work is on Virgil’s mind is made clear in Eclogue IV, the one eclogue in which the poet consciously acknowledges and transgresses the restrictions on pastoral poetry by daring to imagine, if only briefly (*paulo*), “a nobler music” that goes beyond the restrictions Apollo places on *Sicelides Musae*:

Sicilian Muses, sing a nobler music,  
For orchard trees and humble tamarisks  
Do not please everyone; so may your song  
Be of a forest worthy of a consul. (IV, 29)

Eclogue IV presents us with the limit situation of pastoral, a pressing against borders that makes those borders visible. As in the other *Eclogues*, pastoral poetry is presented as a kind of *phusis* continuous with that visible in external nature: as the woods in Eclogue I *resonare* to Tityrus’ music, here song is “of a forest” (*si canimus siluas*). The difference is that this song-forest is asked to do historical work by being

“worthy of a consul” (*siluae sint consule dignae*); it is to have the worth or dignity of a Roman lawgiver. But at the same time it is to remain “Sicilian” and, one presumes, “slender.” Therefore, although the poem’s prophetic passages predict “another war” and the need for “another Achilles,” the utopia it imagines is distinctly pastoral in its outlines. The messianic child (who is not that other Achilles but whose maturity is preceded by him) addressed by the poem will enjoy the same labor-free relation to nature that the shepherds do, but an even more bountiful one:

The goats will come back home all by themselves  
Without being called, their udders full of milk  
The browsing herds will have no fear of lions;  
Your cradle will be a cornucopia  
Of smiling flowers blossoming around you. (IV, 31)

After the fated war, the child’s maturity will bring the entire world into the pastoral condition:

But when the years have brought your strength to manhood,  
No longer then will merchant ships set forth  
Laden with things to trade in foreign places;  
Each land will bear of itself what it needs for itself;  
The earth will suffer the harrow’s tooth no longer  
Nor vines suffer the claw of the pruning-hook;  
No longer need cloth learn to imitate colors;  
Out in the meadow the fleece of the ram will change  
Of its own accord from purple to saffron yellow;  
In the meadow the lambs will graze in bright red coats. (IV, 31)

The child of Arcadia, as he might be called, will herald an end to war and indeed to *techne* itself, since the task of production will be assumed entirely by a nature that has been freed from the cultivation that Virgil here shows to be a form of violent domination. He even goes so far as to imagine that the “imitation” (*mentiri*, which connotes invention, deception, and feigning) of colors practiced in clothmaking will be replaced by spontaneous (*sponte*) “change” (*mutabit*, connoting alteration, exchange, and substitution). The Eclogue ends with the poet imagining the glory that would be his should he live long enough to become “The teller of the story of your

deeds”—a glory that would in effect permit him to transcend his “slender” condition, defeating not only Apollo the god of poetry but Orpheus, the archetypal poet; Calliope his mother, muse of epic poetry; and even Arcadia’s presiding spirit, Pan:

Then neither Linus nor Thracian Orpheus could  
Defeat me in the singing contest, though  
Orpheus’ mother, Calliope, were there,  
And Linus’ father, Apollo the beautiful;  
And Pan himself, Arcadia the judge,  
Judged by Arcadia, would admit defeat. (IV, 33)

Eclogue IV functions, in effect, to inscribe the limit beyond which pastoral becomes a mode of totalization that negates pastoral’s essential modesty: the negation of a negation. We might call this limit pastoral’s messianic supplement in the Derridean sense<sup>11</sup>; and we might also posit the messianic impulse as a perpetual and necessary *temptation* of pastoral. As an image of life in nature founded upon aesthetic autonomy, pastoral constantly seems to ask to overspread its bounds—to integrate the whole political and economic world into Arcadia. But quite aside from the hubris of this (which leads Apollo in the later Eclogue VI to “tweak” [*uellit*] the poet’s ear), an Arcadia which judges its own presiding spirit defeated by “greater music” (*maiora canamus*) is no longer Arcadia at all. Again we are confronted with the special weakness, “slenderness,” or “velleity” that is intrinsic to pastoral, a weakness that becomes the secret strength of pastoral poetics as they intersect with avant-garde practices.

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<sup>11</sup> That is, the messianic utopia acts toward pastoral as “a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence.” As such, it is the marker of pastoral’s fundamental inadequacy, its lack of presence and plenitude: “But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence” (italics in original). It is interesting to note that, in the context of the writings of Rousseau, we see that “that dangerous supplement,” with the auto-erotic connotation Derrida discovers for the word, and which functions to negotiate between nature and society (or Reason) while threatening the health of both, begins to resemble a version of pastoral. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976): 144-152.

### 3. *Avant-Pastoral Bricolage*

Peter Bürger conceptualizes avant-garde practice as that which seeks to transgress the boundaries of what is normative for art—a normativity founded on the supposed autonomy of art. The avant-garde is that which seeks, pace Auden, to write a poetry that makes something happen. The poem *as* “happening” is succinctly demonstrated by the activity of the Situationists, one of the twentieth-century avant-gardes excluded from Bürger’s discussion. The techniques that characterize the avant-garde work, for Bürger, are nearly indistinguishable from those that characterize modernist artworks: collage, montage, “inorganicism.” What makes a work avant-garde is a combination of the intention (to transgress art’s institutional boundaries) and the response (“shock”). For Susan Buck-Morss, the shock effect of the avant-garde has a specifically moral and political intention: “What counts is that the aesthetic experience... shock us out of moral complacency and political resignation” (63). Opposed to Bürger’s conception of the avant-garde as that which seeks to erase the distance between art and life is her notion that such artworks might have the ability “to arrest the flow of history, and to open up time for alternative visions” (63), which is nothing less than the re-assertion of art’s need for an at least temporary autonomy. Bürger himself suggests the need for such art, although he might not be willing to grant it the (for him, historical) label of the avant-garde, when he writes of the co-optation of the avant-garde’s attempted sublation of artistic autonomy: “In late capitalist society, intentions of the historical avant-garde are being realized but the result has been a disvalue. Given the experience of the false sublation of autonomy, one will need to ask whether a sublation of the autonomy status can be desirable at all, whether the distance between art and the praxis of life is not requisite for that free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable” (Bürger 54). The pastoral artwork constructs just such a “free space” and in so doing appears as the

diametric opposite of Bürger's avant-garde artwork. It seeks to set up a zone of aesthetic autonomy (one self-consciously opposed to existing artistic institutions) and the desired aesthetic effect is emollient and anti-abrasive. Their dichotomy is even more starkly illustrated by Bürger's terminology of the organic vs. non-organic artwork; even if we substitute reasonable synonyms (coherent vs. incoherent, or closed vs. open), it is still clear that the goal of pastoral is an image of the reconciliation with nature that the avant-garde artwork rejects as ameliorative (or as Marcuse puts it, "affirmative") of unacceptable existing social conditions. Yet they are fundamentally similar in that both stage the creation of a zone of autonomy that is immediately compromised by its own law. Just as it is the *raison d'être* of the avant-garde artwork to assert an autonomy that its social context forbids in actual life, with the gap between freedom and oppression manifesting as a painful shock, so does the pastoral artwork describe a scene of autonomy visibly threatened by the social context it is meant to provide a soothing and temporary refuge from; the shock of pastoral comes as its audience is returned to the cold water of reality. Both depend for their aesthetic impact on a kind of pleasure-in-pain or *jouissance*, though pastoral *jouissance* is temporal and nostalgic (presenting its content, "mimetic commerce with nature,"<sup>12</sup> as a dream deferred) while avant-garde *jouissance* is more spatial and immediate in its orientation (fragmentation and montage defers the unity of the artwork). Together they take on an anarchist political orientation whose faith in nature is matched and guided

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<sup>12</sup> One of the needs that Habermas describes as the contents of the bourgeois artwork: "Habermas has attempted to define these contents as they characterize all art in bourgeois society: 'Art is a sanctuary for the—perhaps merely cerebral—satisfaction of those needs which become quasi illegal in the material life process of bourgeois society' (*Bewusstmachende oder rettende Kritik*, p. 192). Among these needs, he counts the 'mimetic commerce with nature,' 'solidary living with others,' and the 'happiness of a communicative experience which is not subject to the imperatives of means-ends rationality and allows as much scope to the imagination as to the spontaneity of behavior' (p. 192 f.)." Quoted in Bürger, 25.

by an unfaltering skepticism toward reification, particularly the reification of social institutions.

There is a sense in which the gap between pastoral and the avant-garde is described by the gap between Heidegger's nostalgic ontology and Adorno's negative dialectics. Heidegger seeks in his early work to recall to our minds the originary "question of Being" (*Seinsfrage*) and in his later work to recapture modes of revealing or being-production that have been superseded by the era of modern technology. The Heideggerian artwork sets up a world in deliberate opposition to the mode of worldmaking or revealing that characterizes technology, which organizes everything for the sake of more efficient production. His answer to the question, "What are poets for in a destitute time?", is that they preserve or conserve a mode of being/meaning-production that can only return to prominence with the messianic return of "the gods." The gods, in this case, stand for the transcendental horizon of a culture that would make the poet's anti-technological practice of meaning-production (what Heidegger calls "dwelling") normative for everyone. Adorno's thought is more obviously historical and embedded within the tradition of dialectical materialism that describes modes of economic production as anterior to cultural production: whatever the relative independence of the latter, its truth-content is to be judged by its relation to the dominant mode of production and its complicity with or resistance to the cultural forms promulgated by that mode. For Adorno, the artwork functions as kind of reserve or reminder of the mimetic contact with nature that is required for the actual somatic happiness of individuals that the worlds of total administration (both capitalist and communist) work to suppress. Because he has no more faith than Heidegger in the dialectical triumph of spirit (much less that of communism), the Adornian artwork can only serve as a kind of temporary habitation that serves to reveal the painful unhealed wound in the reality of total administration that the thinker must attack with negative

dialectics. Heidegger's affirmation of a pastoral utopia (what we might call "vulgar pastoral") as seen in his sentimental peans to the wisdom of the Black Forest farmer is checked by Adorno's sober negativity, his commitment to the formal innovations of modernism, and his almost Biblical aversion to the production of graven images. The limited environmental imagination of Adorno and Marxist critical theory generally is in turn supplemented by Heidegger's care for the earth as the stage for all appearing, the concealed foundation of social being. Together their thought creates the general boundaries for this study of the sometimes surprising interventions of pastoral thought into avant-garde poetry, and vice-versa.

Such a poetry cannot succeed simply through the interpolation of natural or pastoral content: representations of natural scenes or the simple pleasures of simple folk. Avant-pastoral is negative pastoral: a pastoral of fragments and collage. Or more specifically, of *bricolage* in the sense Michel de Certeau gives to this word: the *tactic* of a marginalized group attempting to preserve its own being in a space not fully its own, the "proper" space of power or *strategy*:

I call a "strategy" the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an "environment." A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper (propre)* and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, "clientèles," "targets," or "objects" of research). Political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model.

I call a "tactic," on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a

tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. The "proper" is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing." Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities." The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them. (xix)

The *bricoleur* as de Certeau imagines him is not simply a constructor of assemblages, but one who "makes do" with materials not his own: he feels himself to be "other" to the "subject of will and power" who has organized the space he navigates in. De Certeau's paradigmatic example of a *bricoleur* is a North African living in Paris:

[He] insinuates *into* the system imposed on him by the construction of a low-income housing development or of the French language the ways of "dwelling" (in a house or language) peculiar to his native Kabylia. He superimposes them and, by that combination, creates for himself a space in which he can find *ways of using* the constraining order of the place or of the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation. (30)

For a student of pastoral, this “art of being in between” has a familiar ring: the *bricoleur* creates actively what the pastoral shepherd receives passively as a middle landscape between civilization and nature—though in de Certeau’s example it would be more accurate to say the North African is caught between two civilizations, one subaltern, one hegemonic. The *bricoleur* is not a producer, for the logic of production is strategic and belongs to power. He is a consumer: but this role does not carry the passivity this term normally implies. For de Certeau, the consumer is a kind of stealth producer whose consumption produces, on a micro level, a space for those trapped in a world they never made: “In reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called “consumption” and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of the circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would it place them?) but in an art of using those imposed on it” (31). The emphasis on consumption as that which “confronts” the ethos of production echoes the pastoral emphasis on song over labor we have seen in Virgil’s *Eclogues*. More broadly, in the context of poetry de Certeau’s notion of “everyday life” as a kind of tactical art situates us generically within the bounds of pastoral and georgic, rather than the epic which we might regard as the ultimate in “strategic” poetry: the text that assimilates a given culture’s history to its *proper* place.

Bricolage would not in itself seem to be a pastoral practice, for the pastoralist does appear to have been accorded his own “proper” place, the “middle landscape” of Arcadia between Rome and the wilderness. The *bricoleur* is forced into self-preservative activity, watchful for opportunities that occur in time, and his victories are ephemeral: “Whatever it [tactics] wins, it does not keep.” But as the *Eclogues* teach us, Arcadia is not secure in its “properness”: its imaginary dispensation from the

“gods” in Rome is subject to repeal at any time due to political expediencies, and even Tityrus can only win his security by journeying into the heart of civilization. The problem is magnified a hundredfold under the conditions of modernity in which, as both Raymond Williams and Frederic Jameson are at pains to show, the “precapitalist enclaves” that Arcadia seeks to represent are threatened by extinction (if in fact they can ever be said to have existed at all).

I therefore propose that Arcadia is a kind of weaker version of the *propre*, whose “borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality” is blurred at best, and whose tenuous security can only be preserved by such de Certeauvian tactics as *la perruque*,<sup>13</sup> “reading,”<sup>14</sup> and bricolage. “arts of doing” (the French title of de Certeau’s book is *Arts de faire*) associated not with any author(ity) but with the common man: “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” (de Certeau 28). The avant-pastoralist attempts to close the life/art gap by introducing the tactics of everyday life into art, challenging the “institution art” that strategically preserves its own proper place of autonomy. Such a practice seeks to speak on behalf of the “environment” that strategic practices of writing seek to isolate themselves from so as to constitute it as a “target,” object, or standing reserve. This “environment” as de Certeau construes it is social, but for pastoral connotes the external nature threatened by the imperatives of unbridled technological production as well as the internal nature of individual and collective human being subjected to domination. The

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<sup>13</sup> “Take, for example, what in France is called *la perruque*, ‘the wig.’ *La perruque* is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer.... Accused of stealing or turning material to his own ends and using the machines for his own profit, 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” (de Certeau 25).

<sup>14</sup> “The reader produces gardens that miniaturize and collate a world, like a Robinson Crusoe discovering an island; but he, too, is ‘possessed’ by his own fooling and jesting that introduces plurality and difference into the written system of a society and a text. He is thus a novelist. He deterritorializes himself, oscillating in a nowhere between what he invents and what changes him” (de Certeau 173).

avant-pastoralist resorts not just to bricolage, then, but to what I shall call *ecolage*: a tactic of “making do” that draws its ad hoc materials from both the strategized space of technocapitalist culture and the subaltern “environment” that is the nonidentical Other to that culture. Ecolage attempts to put these materials in relation to each other so as to form new patterns, force fields, or ideograms that suggest startling new connections while respecting their components’ nonidentity with each other, perhaps even with themselves. Ecolage deploys fragments of mimesis or mimetic fragments, images of culture and nature that cannot be assimilated to any totalizing, techno-strategic vision—unlike the practices of positive pastoral, which seek to territorialize nature and found a social totality upon it. Ecolage becomes the principal tactic of negative pastoralists who have abandoned the heroic productivist ethos of the high modernists as inappropriate to the culture of late capitalism, but who hope nevertheless to resist pastiche, the dominant mode of postmodernist representation, by insisting on a practice of environmental mimesis. Such thinking may derive from a too-easy analogy between poetry and ecology, one which locates in both discourses a hard romantic kernel of opposition to the techno-capitalist construction of all being as being-for-production. This analogy has a long history in North American poetry and poetics, both documented in and furthered by Jed Rasula’s extraordinary book-length essay *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry*. Rasula writes, “I would describe poetry as ecology in the community of words” (7), and his book is itself a consummate product of ecolage:

*This Compost* goes about its business by pragmatically realizing its issues in its design. It is written in units of variable length, but tending to brevity, the sequence of which is determined by imaginal, not logical considerations; its argument is hologrammatic, not hypotactic—that is, not hierarchically disposed, but radically egalitarian. Its parts are its

wholes and vice versa. if holes are found in the “argument,” all the better—they’re for burrowing, for warmth and intimacy. (8)

This dissertation does not itself so purport to practice what it preaches. But it will proceed from an extension of the fundamental analogy that Rasula’s text is founded on, relying more specifically on the history and generic resources of pastoral as the primary fiction from which the image of a harmonious relation between human beings and nature—both external and their own—has derived its power of “fascinated contemplation.” Pastoral poetry has always created its own tenuous ground, and its pathos derives from that fact:

Time takes all we have away from us;  
I remember when I was a boy I used to sing  
Every long day of summer down to darkness,  
And now I am forgetting all my songs;  
My voice grows hoarse; I must have been seen by a wolf.  
Menalcas will sing the songs for you, when he comes. (Eclogue IX, 75)

Eclogue IX is a moving elegy for the Arcadians’ own poetic powers, whose ability to summon the green world into being has been made into a memory by harsh political realities. In the twentieth century there came a similar moment of reckoning for the poets of the avant-garde, particularly in the aftermath of World War II when more totalizing schema for utopian transformation such as socialism were discredited or under siege. It was then that the comparative weakness of pastoral realized its subversive potential as a site in which to create radical new forms of imaginative, social, and textual life. No single career illustrates the shift in emphasis from a strong, positive, totalizing pastoral to a weak, negative one better than Ezra Pound’s. The anxiety of Eclogue IX manifests in his work as an attempt to find a new and central role for the poet as an economic and political adviser to princes, whose vision of a pastoral state was ultimately shattered by both “the weapons of soldiers” and his own hubris. It is only in the *Pisan Cantos* that he discovers that it is in the nature of

pastoral poetry to subvert all dominion, including its own. His disciple Louis Zukofsky makes a similar retreat from the overtly political, and in the wake of failing to accumulate much in the way of cultural capital, attempts to reconstitute utopia first as an Arcadia of the family unit, then through a kind of imploded ecolage of the individual word. One of the most eccentric and relatively undiscovered major poets of the postwar period, Ronald Johnson, comes closest to materializing a total pastoral world that nonetheless relies on ecolage to preserve a space for the social and environmental freedom of imagination. The textual worlds these poets create deal with the anxiety of political, economic, and even aesthetic dispossession by manifesting negative versions of pastoral that deliberately conflict with their own striving toward coherence. Their green worlds are fractured and self-destructing, using determinate negation to criticize their own presentation of autonomy while simultaneously seeking imaginative alternatives to existing cultural institutions.

The normative avant-garde artwork is a Meliboeus, exiled from the Arcadia of aesthetic autonomy, a figure of negation inscribed with the injustice of a dominating social order, outward bound for the wilderness: “Utterly cut off [*toto diuisos*] from all the world” (*Eclogues* I, 9). The normative pastoral artwork is a Tityrus, a positive figure for the disturbing surplus to civilized rationality that has been placed outside the bounds of the city for civilization’s own protection: “Go feed your flocks as in the old days; / Herdsmen, raise your cattle [*summittite tauros*] as you used to” (I, 7). Together they present the dialectical possibilities for an avant-pastoral poetry that deploys the ambiguities of pastoral ideology for critical and utopian ends.

## CHAPTER 2

### Fascist Idyll and Negative Pastoral in Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*

#### 1. *The Order of Confucius, the Nature of Pound*

“Birds, said Hudson, are not automata. / Even Jonathan Edwards is said to have noticed trees / and as for who have a code and no principles...” (C97/698). This characteristic remark from late in *The Cantos* affirms what in Pound's mind was a solid connection between reverence for the natural world and Confucian “principles,” in the absence of which a mere “code” is an empty and pernicious thing: “And the dogmatic have to lie now and again / to maintain their conformity, / the chun tze [righteous man], never” (699). Pound connects the righteous affect associated with the Puritan author of “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” with the descriptive precision of the naturalist William Henry Hudson, willing the juxtaposition of these two figures to affirm the connection between utopian labor and a relation to nature characterized by non-exploitative care for its creatures. The dialectic between pastoral and utopia is one of the primary mechanisms through which *The Cantos* does its work of rescue and transformation, and by which their author, to his own chagrin and surprise, eventually found himself transformed.

Lawrence J. Rainey's introduction to *A Poem Including History: Textual Studies in The Cantos* includes a brief but illuminating discussion of the role of “modernist pastoral” in *The Cantos*:

If *The Cantos* remain central to literary and cultural debate about the twentieth century, it is not because they offer delicate passages of modernist pastoral, however endearing those have proved to general readers and scholars alike. Pound could always turn out a line that invoked quite conventional, even banal notions of beauty—his nymphs and gods cavorting among the olive groves are surely to be classed

among these—and in his mature years he seems to have tossed them off with abandon, even disdainfully, sprinkling them like faux bijoux amid the thorny thickets of historical documents and endless lists of worthy emperors from China. But these sporadic gestures could never disguise the poem's abiding preoccupation with history, its massively overdetermined effort to trace a cultural genealogy of the twentieth century, to locate in the recesses of private and public memory the resources for a utopian transformation of Western culture. (1-2)

History, memory, and their potential to serve as “resources for a utopian transformation of Western culture” are here opposed to the “delicate passages” and “sporadic gestures” that can only distract from the Herculean task of renewal that Pound has set for his epic. So characterized, such passages could serve at best only to ornament a “utopian transformation” so total that it aims beyond cultural renewal toward a reform of the political and economic structures of the West as well. Rainey is correct, of course, to focus attention on the singular importance of history and historical documents to *The Cantos*; but his disparagement of pastoral neglects both its usefulness as a critical instrument and the more questionable aspects of Pound's vision of utopia, which is after all to be presided over by a Fascist “Boss.”

Rainey's denigration of pastoral is thoroughly conventional. Pound's muscular, “massively overdetermined” utopian poem is seen as fundamentally incompatible with the “banal notions of beauty” that Rainey associates with “delicate” pastoral. Rainey thus stands in the long tradition of pastoral's detractors that goes at least as far back as Samuel Johnson's infamous attack on Milton's *Lycidas*: “In this poem there is no nature, for there is no truth; there is no art, for there is nothing new. Its form is that of pastoral, easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting: whatever images it can supply are long ago exhausted; and its inherent improbability always forces dissatisfaction on the

mind” (409-410). Johnson’s dismissal disqualifies pastoral from either offering a genuine contact with nature (Kant’s realm of necessity) or with art, much less with history (the realm of human action, the practical, freedom); he anticipates Pound’s “Make it new” as a qualification for good art and condemns pastoral for being intrinsically unable to satisfy that condition, since the genre is *ipso facto* conventional and backward-looking. Linked to this notion of pastoral is Johnson’s contention that “the diction [of *Lycidas*] is harsh, the rhymes uncertain, and the numbers unpleasing. What beauty there is we must therefore seek in the sentiments and images” (409). Because pastoral carries with it no intrinsic formal interest or rigor, the interest or beauty of the poem can only be found in its content (“sentiments”) and imagery; an imagery that Johnson condemns for its falseness, its “fiction.” But Milton’s pastoral “has yet a grosser fault”: it arrogates to itself questions of redemption and renewal that necessarily lie beyond the scope of its trivial genre:

With these trifling fictions are mingled the most awful and sacred truths, such as ought never to be polluted with such irreverent combinations. The shepherd likewise is now a feeder of sheep, and afterwards an ecclesiastical pastor, a superintendent of a Christian flock. Such equivocations are always unskillful; but here they are indecent, and at least approach to impiety, of which, however, I believe the writer not to have been conscious. (410)

If the telos of modernism that Rainey finds in Pound is “a utopian transformation of Western culture” through historical work (that is, both work *on* history and work *in* history), then the implied telos of pastoral is a retreat from history into mere images, “faux bijoux.” The occurrence of such images in Pound’s epic are put down to “abandon” and “disdain,” spoonfuls of sugar to help the heaping dose of historical medicine go down. In the “disdain” that Rainey attributes to Pound, surely

an echo of his own disdain, we hear an echo of Johnson's calumny against the "irreverent combinations" in *Lycidas*: pastoral imagery is seen as irrelevant at best and a dangerous usurpation of the task of "utopian transformation" at worst. The genre is synecdochally conceptualized as a fund of conventional imagery with no intrinsic relation to the historical work toward utopia that comprises Pound's epic. All such images have to offer to the reader is a little breathing room, a momentary stay against the relentless accumulation of historical detail and constellated argument. Pastoral only functions for Rainey as an interruption of *The Cantos*' great task; an aporia in Pound's utopia.

But even if we leave aside the crucial question as to whether Pound's particular utopia is politically desirable, I believe Rainey has missed the mark by consigning pastoral to mere ornament and distraction. This is not very surprising given Pound's avowed cosmopolitanism, his urbanity, and his expressions of contempt for provincialism in all its forms (he would no doubt have agreed with Marx and Engels' famous remark about "the idiocy of rural life" in *The Communist Manifesto*). But Pound's very sophistication—his sense of himself as a frustrated courtier and advisor to princes—points in the direction of the pastoral fiction through which urban sophisticates have sought a critical perspective on the seat of power that bred them since at least the time of Virgil. For Pound, "a poem including history" goes beyond the chief aspiration of epic—to tell the tale of the tribe—toward actually knocking down the wall between poem and history, so that each may have an impact on the other. The site of that intervention is a pastoral paradise that is not "artificial"; the positive vision of idyllic natural values becomes the instrument for negating the world-picture subsumed under "usury." What Pound ultimately could not control was the dialectical negativity of his pastoral vision, which goes beyond a critique of the

hell of modern Europe to undermine the authoritarian bases of Pound's paradise, "the city of Dioce whose terraces are the colour of stars" (74/445).

Pastoral derives its critical force from the harmonious image of man-in-nature that it posits; however, Pound's ideas about nature can seem confused and contradictory. Usury in *The Cantos* is condemned for being "CONTRA NATURAM" (45/230), akin to the "unnatural" sin of sodomy as humorously suggested by the story of the "pore honest sailor" at the end of Canto 12. Trevor Sawler has argued that Pound's vision of nature is precisely that, an imaginary nature inseparable from the mythological figures and images that Pound places there so as to make it a force for change and metamorphosis: "While the poet's imagination is the catalyst for metamorphoses, nature forms the strata upon which that catalyst acts. Yet Pound's nature, here and elsewhere in the poem [Canto 2], is not merely the natural world. Like the Romantics before him, nature is as much imagined as it is perceived. It is a place of mystery, and an important part of the poet's attempt to articulate what he sees around him, and within himself" (113). This manifestly imaginary nature is for Sawler the great engine of the poem, while the history it includes is associated with the unnatural: "Pound juxtaposes the powers of the imagination and the powers of history; stability and flux; beauty and vulgarity; harmony and discord; and nature and sterility. [In Canto 1], Pound establishes echoes of history, sterility, and discord—the very essence of those things that Pound sees as *contra naturam*" (111). Nature and "the gods" are aligned against the sterile wreck of history; therefore for Sawler Pound relies in *The Pisan Cantos* on the contemplation of nature in order to achieve an "internal Dioce" to supplement the wreckage of his hopes for a (Fascist) Dioce on earth. Sawler's insight about Pound's association of nature with the generative powers of the imagination is an important one, but his account of history as being equivalent

to “sterility and discord” is far too simplistic, ignoring Pound’s obsession with the utopian task of his poem as that which occurs in and through history.

Robert Casillo presents a more complex if still ultimately reductive argument about Pound’s attitudes toward nature, summarized in the title of his article: “Nature, History, and Anti-Nature in Ezra Pound’s Fascism.”<sup>1</sup> Casillo claims that Pound associates a cultivated nature or agrarianism with hierarchical, phallogocentric, and Fascist values; raw nature is a feminine and formless “chaos,” “bog,” or “swamp” (286): “Of all the acts of Mussolini, Ezra Pound was most impressed and fascinated by the draining of the Pontine marshes, to which he often refers in his poetry and prose” (284). The marshes become associated, according to Casillo, with a kind of “unnatural” nature, which is in turn associated with Jews, usury, the feminine, and the unconscious: “[Pound] also associates the Jews and one Jew in particular [Sigmund Freud] with a realm as mysterious as the inner body: the unconscious mind, in which are buried man’s repressed emotions, feelings, and instincts. In the broadcasts, the swamp, and therefore Jews, are the source of dangerous bacilli, which, like usury, are incommensurable and unnameable” (291). Against this mysterious, nearly unrepresentable “anti-Nature” of the swamp that “symbolizes unbidden, spontaneous, and unorganized nature” (294), Pound contradictorily posits both an idealized, timeless, mythological nature and a nature to be “mastered” by historical and technological work. To explain the first version of Poundian nature, Casillo summarizes one of the major arguments of Daniel Pearlman’s book *The Barb of Time: On the Unity of Ezra Pound’s Cantos*:

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<sup>1</sup> The substance of Casillo’s argument reappears in his book *The Genealogy of Demons: Anti-Semitism, Fascism, and the Myths of Ezra Pound* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), but I have found his article to be more directly applicable to my own interests in this dissertation.

Daniel Pearlman argues that man can attain harmony with nature only by escaping linear or historical time into a ritually sanctified world, in which time is an unchanging cyclical process and culture is linked inseparably to the seasons. For Pound, history amounts to what Pearlman describes as a mere “series of unique and repeatable events,” a “realm of suffering” characterized by violence, discontinuity, and above all, usury, all of which separate man from nature and destroy those myths and traditions which link man to natural process. Hence for Pound “Time is the evil,” the enemy of nature’s eternal plentitude (C 74/444). by contrast, organic or mythical time is based on the “perpetually recurrent cycles of birth, death, and rebirth in organic nature.” Abandoning history, man recovers an unceasing present in which he represents, follows, and renews the timeless seasonal pattern in the permanent forms of myth and ritual. In Canto 52—the first of the Chinese Cantos, and based heavily on the Chinese Book of Rites, *Li Ki*—Pound celebrates a society in which seasonal rituals, performed from year to year, constantly renew the unbroken harmony of man and cosmos. Thus Pound’s fundamental dramatic conflict pits cyclical time against history. (296-97)

Casillo thinks that Pearlman overstates his case, since Pound’s Fascism requires his active participation in history; yet the dichotomy of history versus nature is affirmed, even as this dichotomy creates problems for Pound:

Such a commitment as Pound’s to the historical enterprise means that violence of some sort must inevitably be done to nature, which is not the same as history. But in an ideology such as his, which appeals to timeless and “totalitarian” nature as a normative idea, the violence

which man does to nature—and to his own instincts—must be disguised and concealed. One of Pound’s ways of concealing such violence is to create a myth of cyclical time, whereby all historical changes which he happens to advocate are referred back to original and seasonal myths. Another way is to create a myth of technology and politics, whereby man, instead of arbitrarily delimiting and imposing his will upon nature and instinct (human nature), “aids” a compliant natural process and lovingly educes the forms and capacities latent within it; to quote Canto 38, the Italian marshes had “been waiting [for a cultivator] since Tiberius’ time. . .” (C 38/189). (299-300)

Casillo’s skepticism, even contempt, for Pound’s ideology of nature matches Rainey’s—though unlike Rainey he is equally contemptuous of Pound’s utopian ambitions, inseparable in Casillo’s mind from the poet’s Fascism and anti-Semitism. The arbitrariness of Pound’s ideas about nature is most damningly visible in Casillo’s concept of Poundian anti-Nature, the “swamp” into which human beings (Jews) become objects of the historical violence against nature in its unacceptable, “formless” guise. For Casillo, what we might call Pound’s pastoral ideology is merely a subset of his unacceptable Fascist ideology. But as Casillo himself suggests, Pound’s ideology of nature actually contains two irreconcilable dimensions: the “myth of cyclical time” and the “myth of technology and politics” which conceal the violent mastery of nature with their claims for a tender, quasi-Heideggerian letting-be or *poiesis*. Casillo’s understandable suspicion of Pound’s ideological positioning fails to recognize the changes it undergoes as *The Cantos* progress: while Pound never actually renounces Fascism, there is a marked shift in his vision of nature that arrives with the rupture in ideology that is the experience of *The Pisan Cantos*.

Pound's ideas about nature change as he progresses through his poem. In *A Draft of XXX Cantos* nature is nearly inseparable from Greek myth, the site of a timeless synchronic refuge from the diachronic movement of history. Peter Nicholls has suggested that "myth" in the early Cantos is used to create a provisional and lyrical order:

As we read on through these Cantos, however, it becomes clear that Pound is attempting to use his lyrical rhythms both to avoid any pre-emptive closure and to open up a range of formal contiguities which would not be accessible to any rational dialectic or argument. The ordering of items is deliberately provisional: ideas and images are cross-woven *in the hope of* fusing to one unified awareness. The spatial world of myth thus becomes the locus of desire and affectivity, a place where the mind frees itself from the monetary order, and the "labour" of writing yields to song. (43, italics in original)

The pastoral logic of this is made clear by the passage from Canto 20 that Nicholls quotes immediately following the above; not only does song supplant labor (a fundamental pastoral gesture) but the song is dominated by natural imagery:

The ranunculae, and almond,  
Boughs set in espalier,  
Duccio, Agostino, *e l'olors*—  
The smell of that place—*d'anoi ganres*.  
Air moving under the boughs,  
The cedars there in the sun,  
Hay new cut on hill slope,  
And the water there in the cut  
Between the two lower meadows; sound,  
The sound, as I have said, a nightingale  
Too far off to be heard.  
And the light falls, *remir*,  
from her breast to her thighs. (C 20/90)

“The spatial world of myth,” marked out through deixis (“The cedars *there* in the sun,” “And the water *there* in the cut”), itself marks out an imaginary Arcadian space in which desire may freely flow, while, as Nicholls argues, “lyric precision is designed to create a kind of ‘energy,’ a mobility of attention which allows insight but no confirmation of the end to which it is to be put” (43). This is in short a manifestation of what Casillo identified as Pound’s “myth of cyclical time,” but for Nicholls it has the positive value of postponing closure and fostering openness: a posture Pound found increasingly difficult to sustain as his political engagement intensified (Nicholls 2). Actually, even within Canto 20 Pound’s “mobility of attention” encompasses nature itself, leaving contradictory impressions; its pastoral imagery adds up to an at best ambivalent whole. While the passage quoted above presents us with an almost classical vision of the Arcadian play of desire (the hallmark of which for Pound is the Provençal word *noigandres*, whose meaning he allows to remain ambiguous<sup>2</sup>), a page later “energy” is shown to derive not from the “lyric precision” that assembles the middle landscape of pastoral, but from nature as wilderness and jungle:

Jungle:

Glaze green and red feathers, jungle,  
 Basis of renewal, renewals;  
 Rising over the soul, green virid, of the jungle,  
 Lozenge of the pavement, clear shapes,  
 Broken, disrupted, body eternal,  
 Wilderness of renewals, confusion  
 Basis of renewals, subsistence,  
 Glazed green of the jungle;  
 Zoe, Marozia, Zothar,  
 loud over the banners,

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<sup>2</sup> Ambiguous and unmarked by scholarly authority, as shown by Provençal scholar Emil Lévy’s inability to define the word when Pound brought it to his attention: “You know for seex mon’s of my life / ‘Efery night when I go to bett, I say to myself: / ‘Noigandres, eh, *noigandres*, / ‘Now what the DEFFIL can that mean!’” (20/90). “Suggested meanings of *noigandres* range from ‘walnuts’ to ‘banishes sadness.’ Lévy emended the manuscript text to read ‘d enoi gandres’ and came up with ‘wards off boredom.’ Pound does not commit himself to any translation but in effect lets the reader devise his own” (Terrell 81). It is this deliberate openness that makes “noigandres” a signifier for the free play of desire.

Glazed grape, and the crimson,  
HO BIOS (20/91-92)

This is the jumbled or “candied” vision of Niccolò d’Este, mad after having executed his wife and bastard son for having an adulterous affair, so that an image of nature as “basis of renewals” incorporates the names of three women notorious for their sexual misdeeds. Nature as sheer power of life (“HO BIOS”) shades into the “unnatural” acts of adulteresses and poisoners, and is a source of “confusion,” as conveyed by the contradictory line “Broken, disrupted, body eternal.” But although attributed to d’Este, the notion of nature suddenly manifesting as a miasmatic “anti-Nature” recurs too often in *The Cantos* to be laid at the feet of one of its minor personages. The ambiguity persists in Pound’s account of the *lotophagoi* or “respectable dope smokers” (Terrell 83) that follows d’Este’s vision. While hardly presented as admirable figures (“Lotophagoi of the suave nails, quiet, scornful” [20/93]), in their haze they still manage to offer a powerful critique of Odyssean nostalgia by describing the assorted miserable fates of his followers. It is a passage that resonates strongly with Adorno and Horkheimer’s presentation of the Lotus-eaters as critical of the violence inherent in the historical work toward utopia,<sup>3</sup> and looks forward to “The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant’s bent shoulders” that opens *The Pisan Cantos*:

“What gain with Odysseus  
“They that died in the whirlpool  
And after many vain labours,  
“Living by stolen meat, chained to the rowingbench,  
“That he should have a great fame  
“And lie by night with the goddess?  
.....  
“Give! What were they given?  
Ear-wax.  
“Poison and ear-wax,  
and a salt grave by the bull-field,

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<sup>3</sup> See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and also Chapter 1, above.

“*neson amumona*, their heads like sea crows in the foam  
“Black splotches, sea-weed under lightning;  
“Canned beef of Apollo, ten cans for a boat load.”  
Ligur’ aoide. (20/93-94)

The “vain labours” of Odysseus and his men are seen as contrary to the divine, even industrial in nature, reducing the sacred oxen of the sun to commodified “Canned beef of Apollo.” But this criticism of the hero of history is put in the mouths of “respectable dope smokers” who have never exposed themselves to the keen singing of the Sirens (“Ligur’ aoide”); they are indirectly depicted as both aesthetically and ethically compromised. Canto 20 thus makes for a shifting and ambiguous pastoral whose elements are suspended in dialectical critique of one another: neither Odysseus nor the Lotus-eaters, neither garden nor jungle can gain the upper hand. But as *The Cantos* progress, this ambiguous pastoral is supplanted by a more straightforwardly ideological one characterized by nostalgia for archaic modes of production (the aesthetic, the artisanal, and the agrarian<sup>4</sup>), seen as somehow capable of overcoming the tyranny of exchange-value that characterizes Pound’s notion of “usury.” In the later Cantos this idyllic economy has two primary manifestations: in the account of the founding of the Monte dei Paschi Bank and in the Confucianism that makes its most sustained manifestation in the China Cantos (52 – 61). However, even Pound’s Confucian idyll contains seeds of negativity, visible as early as Canto 13.

Pound’s agrarian ideology is closely associated with his study of Confucius, whose writings affirm that rulers or “great gentlemen” must derive their values from the common people. Pound’s translation of the *Ta Hsio* or *Great Digest* implies that, for him, the inner nature of the great man is equivalent to the nature contained in “the people”: “17. To love what the people hate, to hate what they love is called doing violence to man’s inborn nature” (*Confucius* 81). Further, Pound’s impression of

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<sup>4</sup> Nicholls 59.

Confucius himself is of a man singularly grounded in everyday reality and the physical world, as he describes in his “Procedure” preface to his translation of *The Analects*:

Given the tradition that the Analects contain nothing superfluous, I was puzzled by the verses re length of the night-gown and the predilection for ginger. One must take them in the perspective of Voltaire’s: “I admire Confucius. He was the first man who did *not* receive a divine inspiration.” By which I mean that these trifling details were useful at a time, and in a world, that tended to myths and to the elevation of its teachers into divinities. Those passages of the Analects are, as I see it, there to insist that Confucius was a Chinaman, not born of a dragon, not in any way supernatural, but remarkably possessed of good sense.  
(*Confucius* 191, italics in original)

For all the veneration due him as a philosopher and advisor, Confucius’ principal gift is simply “good sense,” a peasant virtue.<sup>5</sup> And so the ideal society Pound describes as “Between KUNG and ELEUSIS” (C 52/258) goes beyond William Cookson’s description of “the universe of *The Cantos* [as] one of creative tension between the rational civic order of Confucius and the mysteries of ancient Greek religion” (74). The transcendent “light from Eleusis” is supplemented by the purely immanent and earthly philosophy associated with Confucius. As our reading of Canto 20 suggests, Eleusinian myth in *The Cantos* tends toward the static and antihistorical, or what Pound esteemed in his descriptions of his poem as “the permanent.”<sup>6</sup> The natural

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<sup>5</sup> *The Analects* emphasize the ascetic simplicity of Confucius’ tastes: “He said: a meal of rough rice to eat, water, to drink, bent arm for a pillow, I can be happy in such condition, riches and honours got by injustice seem to me drifting clouds” (*Confucius* 221). The single exception to this asceticism is his taste for music: “In Ch’i he heard the ‘Shao’ sung, and for three months did not know the taste of his meat; said: didn’t figure the performance of music had attained to that summit” (220).

<sup>6</sup> In notes on *The Cantos* dictated to James Laughlin, Pound describes the three levels of content in his poem: “a) What is there – permanent – the sea. / b) What is recurrent – the voyages. / c) What is trivial – the casual – Vasco’s troops weary, stupid parts. (c. 1955)” (Cookson xxvii). The association of nature with “the permanent” was a persistent idea of Pound’s.

world that appears under the sign of Eleusis is always also a mythological world, one in which “the grove demands an altar” (“aram vult nemus” [PC 74.725]) to instantiate the cyclical and permanent nature of the Greeks. But the nature that enters history, or which can serve as a refuge from history, appears under the sign of Confucius. It is the notion of nature in contact with history, as opposed to nature as mythological refuge from history, that dominates the later Cantos. Though this notion, which Casillo subsumed under “the myth of technology and politics,” is no less a fantasy than “the myth of cyclical time,” it is ultimately more significant for the development of negative pastoral as a force in *The Pisan Cantos* and the North American poetry that followed in its wake.

In the bucolic dialogue of Canto 13, adapted from *The Analects*, the philosopher Kung (Confucius) engages in a kind of Socratic questioning of several companions, asking each of them how they plan to seek distinction. Each of them answers “correctly, / ‘That is to say, each in his nature’” (C 58):

And Tseu-lou said, “I would put the defences in order,”  
 And Khieu said, “If I were lord of a province  
 I would put it in better order than this is.”  
 And Tchi said, “I would prefer a small mountain temple,  
 “With order in the observances,  
     with a suitable performance of the ritual,”  
 And Tian said, with his hand on the strings of his lute  
 The low sound continuing  
     after his hand left the strings,  
 And the sound went up like smoke, under the leaves,  
 And he looked after the sound:  
     “The old swimming hole,  
 “And the boys flopping off the planks,  
 “Or sitting in the underbrush playing mandolins.” (C 58)

These different yet equally “correct” responses correspond to the social roles each of Kung’s companions imagines for himself: military, political, or religious. Tian, the musician, gets the most space and emphasis, as his response is preceded by the extended image of music mingling like smoke with the leaves of the tree he sits under.

Unlike the others, all public-minded men, his answer dwells on the bucolic and private pleasures of “boys / flopping off the planks / ‘Or sitting in the underbrush playing mandolins.’” Kung’s response to his interlocutors paraphrases the paragraph Pound offers in his *Confucius*, but here the emphasis is on self-order rather than “precise verbal definitions”:<sup>7</sup>

And Kung said, and wrote on the bo leaves:  
If a man have not order within him  
He can not spread order about him;  
And if a man have not order within him  
His family will not act with due order;  
And if the prince have not order within him  
He can not put order in his dominions.  
And Kung gave the words “order”  
and “brotherly deference”  
And said nothing of the “life after death.”  
And he said  
“Anyone can run to excesses,  
It is easy to shoot past the mark,  
It is hard to stand firm in the middle.” (59)

Kung’s idea of order is directly inscribed on leaves, suggesting an exact correspondence between the ordering of human affairs and the order of nature. His emphasis on the middle (the “unwobbling pivot”) in this context suggests then that “order” consists in achieving a perfect accommodation between opposing impulses. But while Kung’s writing is primarily concerned with the domestic and political spheres, the Canto ends with spoken remarks that seem to be addressed to Tian, the musician:

And Kung said, “Without character you will  
be unable to play on that instrument

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<sup>7</sup> “The men of old wanting to clarify and diffuse throughout the empire that light which comes from looking straight into the heart and then acting, first set up good government in their own states; wanting good government in their states, they first established order in their own families; wanting order in the home, they first disciplined themselves; desiring self-discipline, they rectified their own hearts; and wanting to rectify their hearts, they sought precise verbal definitions of their inarticulate thoughts [the tones given off by the heart]; wishing to attain precise verbal definitions, they set to extend their knowledge to the utmost. This completion of knowledge is rooted in sorting things into organic categories”(quoted in Cookson 26; brackets Cookson’s).

Or to execute the music fit for the Odes.  
The blossoms of the apricot  
    blow from the east to the west,  
And I have tried to keep them from falling.” (60)

The inner order Kung prescribes produces a “character” that for him is an essential precondition for creating music (and by implication, poetry). Juxtaposed with this is an image that relies on a kind of metaphorical tree-husbandry: Kung speaks of his own work as philosopher and advisor as an attempt to keep the “blossoms of the apricot”—a figure for Chinese civilization—from falling.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, seemingly of its own accord, nature is causing these blossoms to blow or bloom “from the east to the west”: from China, or Pound’s fantasy of China, to Europe. Kung sees his role as being that of husbandman to a natural order of civilization that is in danger of decay, as Pound sees himself as struggling to restore order to an already decayed civilization, that of the West. “Character” or the inner order that comes from “stand[ing] firm in the middle” is demanded of the poet Tian just as it is of the philosopher Kung and the would-be poet-philosopher Pound. The order of “middleness” is a total pastoral order that Pound wishes to see extended beyond the quasi-Arcadian bounds of temple, cedar grove, and river described at the beginning of the Canto. But that vision is haunted and compromised by the words and gestures of “Tian the low speaking,” who seems to manifest an alternative pastoral ideal centered in the rejection of the political-historical aspirations of his fellow disciples. Tseou-lou, Khieu, and the others see nature, if they see it at all, as a field for the exercise of power, a “province” to be put in “better order than this is.” For Tian, the proper way to go about husbanding or shepherding nature is by creating music, “sound... like smoke”

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<sup>8</sup> The subtly ironic *unnaturalness* of trying to prevent a tree’s blossoms from falling already foregrounds the contradictions arising from Pound’s desire to turn nature into the static emblem of a human order.

that mingles with the leaves, rather than writing philosophy on them.<sup>9</sup> His idea of personal distinction is not characterized by any sort of public achievement; instead he dwells on the immediate, contingent pleasures of life lived in proximity to music, nature, and the play of desire. Tian's leisurely pastoral may therefore seem to be a mode of the "pastoralism of sentiment" that Leo Marx characterizes as "generated by an urge to withdraw from civilization's growing power and complexity" (9), which he opposes to the more complex "pastoralism of mind" (32) or "pastoral design":

In addition to the ideal, then, the pastoral design in question (it is one among many) embraces some token of a larger, more complicated order of experience. Whether represented by the plight of a dispossessed herdsman or by the sound of a locomotive in the woods, this feature of the design brings a world which is more "real" into juxtaposition with an idyllic vision. It may be called the *counterforce*.... We should understand that the counterforce may impinge upon the pastoral landscape either from the side bordering upon intractable nature or the side facing advanced civilization. (Marx 25-26, italics in original)

Kung's pastoral, by actively shepherding the history that for Marx manifests in the form of a given counterforce (for Marx it is industrial technology; Pound names his "usury"), may appear to embrace the complex, while Tian's appears to be the simple or sentimental variety. But it is Kung's pastoral that is more positively nostalgic, as Pound's repeated attempts to adapt the feudal values of Confucianism to modern Italian Fascism make clear. It may be more strictly accurate to describe the Confucian relation to nature as georgic, since it is based upon agrarian labor and the

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<sup>9</sup> Omitted from the Canto is Kung's preference for Tian's answer above the others: "The philosopher praised these words with a gratified sign and said: I agree with Tian" (*Companion to the Cantos* 62). The omission suggests a desire on Pound's part to accentuate the difference between Kung and Tian.

notion of an abstract “abundance of nature” as the source of all value: “And of the true base of credit, that is / the abundance of nature / with the whole folk behind it” (52/257). Tian’s vision of a literally harmonic and leisurely relation to nature more closely resembles that of the speaker of a Virgilian eclogue or Theocritan idyll.

## **2. Genre and Ideology**

The eclogue, the idyll, and the bucolic poem are all generally acknowledged to be subsets of the pastoral, while the georgic has traditionally been distinguished from pastoral by its didacticism and its valorization of agricultural labor.<sup>10</sup> What unites them for the theorist M.M. Bakhtin is their “chronotope,” their mode of representing space and time: “The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well” (Bakhtin 84-85, italics in original). Thus an examination of the similar but differing chronotopes of pastoral versus georgic will also disclose something of the nature of a “pastoral man” or shepherd versus that of a “georgic man” or laborer. Both genres are recognizably similar in their representations of a “cyclical time” keyed to the rhythms of nature or, more specifically, agricultural production: “The only cyclical time known to ancient literature was an idealized, agricultural, everyday time, one interwoven with the times of nature and myth (the basic stages of its development are Hesiod, Theocritus and Virgil)” (127-28). Out of

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<sup>10</sup> “In his ‘Essay on the Georgic’ (1697), which is the most important modern discussion of the genre, Addison specifically distinguished this kind of poetry from the pastoral (q.v.) and crystallized the definition of the georgic by pointing out that this ‘class of Poetry . . . consists in giving plain and direct instructions.’ The central theme of the georgic is the glorification of labor and praise of simple country life.” “Georgic,” in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton University Press, 1993): 461-462.

this notion of cyclical time Bakhtin constructs his own mythical anthropology of what he calls “folkloric time”(209), “a pre-class, agricultural stage in the development of human society” that is “differentiated and measured only by the events of *collective life*” (206, italics in original). Human life is perfectly synchronized with nature through agricultural labor: “This is the time of labor.... This is the time of *productive growth*” (207, italics in original). Further, “This time is *profoundly spatial and concrete*. It is not separated from the earth or from nature. It, as well as the entire life of the human being, is all on the surface. The agricultural life of men and the life of nature (of the earth) are measured by one and the same scale, by the same events; they have the same intervals, inseparable from each other, present as one (indivisible) act of labor and consciousness” (208, italics in original). These conditions clearly represent for Bakhtin a kind of ur-pastoral, prior to the disunity and mediation that are brought about by class society and the division of labor: “In the era of developing capitalism, the life of society and the state becomes abstract and almost plotless” (209). There comes a fall into individualism which drains basic human activities and pleasures of their former meaning:

Food, drink, copulation and so forth lose their ancient “pathos” (their link, their unity with the laboring life of the social whole); they become a petty private matter; they seem to exhaust all their significance within the boundaries of individual life. As a result of this severance from the producing life of the whole and from the collective struggle with nature, their *real* links with the life of nature are weakened—if not severed altogether. These elements—isolated, impoverished, trivialized—in order to retain their significance in narrative must undergo one or another form of sublimation, a metaphorical broadening of their significance (at the expense of links that had been previously

actual, i.e., not metaphorical); their metaphorical enrichment is purchased at the expense of any dim traces of the past that might still remain. (215, italics in original)

Not only do basic human activities of consumption and pleasure lose their “pathos,” but nature itself is disenchanting by the loss of “the collective struggle” with it:

When the immanent unity of time disintegrated, when individual life-sequences were separated out, lives in which the gross realities of communal life had become merely petty private matters; when collective labor and the struggle with nature had ceased to be the only arena for man’s encounter with nature and the world—then nature itself ceased to be a living participant in the events of life. Then nature became, by and large, a “setting for action,” its backdrop; it was turned into landscape, it was fragmented into metaphors and comparison serving to sublimate individual and private affairs and adventures not connected in any real or intrinsic way with nature itself. (217)

From this folkloric past Bakhtin derives rules for the chronotope that he calls simply “the idyll,” of which georgic and pastoral appear merely as subgroups: “We may distinguish the following pure types: the love idyll (whose basic form is the pastoral); the idyll with a focus on agricultural labor; the idyll dealing with craft-work; and the family idyll” (224). These idylls have “several features in common, all determined by their general relationship to the immanent unity of folkloric time. This finds expression predominantly in the special relationship that time has to space in the idyll: an organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and crannies, its familiar mountains, valleys, fields, rivers and forests, and one’s own home... This little spatial world is limited and sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of

the world” (225). Temporally the idyll is marked by “the age-old rooting of the life of generations to a single place, from which this life, in all its events, is inseparable”; there is a “blurring of all the temporal boundaries made possible by a unity of place” (225). Insofar as there is history in the idyll, it is of a weak variety measured by recurrent generations, not singular events.

Returning to Pound, we can immediately see a tendency toward idyll in Pound’s conception and representation of medieval China as its own world (albeit hardly a “little” one) whose radical separation from Europe accomplishes its idyllic spatiality. Further, Peter Nicholls has noted the “spatial” quality that Pound’s putatively diachronic account of Chinese history assumes, thanks in part to his “highly stylised idiom and format of presentation”:

The result is to create an almost “spatial” feeling for events situated in time. The rapid variation of names, dynasties, and regimes actually tends to displace the strictly linear movement of Pound’s source. Things recur and endure, and we have the sense of events coexisting in time rather than fulfilling some progressive evolutionary design. Pound’s concern is with continuity and extent (“the Wall was from Yulin to Tsé-ho” – LIV, p. 285), and the effect is one of an almost timeless interpenetration of past and present as history yields its “permanent” moral insights (“Law of MOU is law of the just middle, the pivot” – LIII, p. 269). (115)

The “spatialization” of history in the China Cantos causes their “idyllization,” while the numbing encyclopedic recurrence of events has the curious effect of suspending the sense of “history” as Westerners normally understand it. The second primary attribute of the idyll, according to Bakhtin, is its restricted content: “it is severely limited to only a few of life’s basic realities. Love, birth death, marriage,

labor, food and drink, stages of growth—these are the basic realities of idyllic life” (225-226); “Strictly speaking, the idyll does not know the trivial details of everyday life. Anything that has the appearance of common everyday life, when compared with the central unrepeatable events of biography and history, here begins to look precisely like the most important things in life” (226). The idyll reverses the hierarchical privileging of the extraordinary over the ordinary; it is an inverted history of the cycles of life—literally “natural history”—directly opposed to and constituting a withdrawal from the history characterized by “central unrepeatable events.” The Chinese history Pound presents to us achieves the status of idyll by stressing the fundamental *repetition* of a cycle of events, entirely distinct from normative historiographies of historical development and “progress.” As Reed Way Dasenbrock has put it, the China Cantos are fundamentally antisequential: “No syntactic accommodation is made to sequentiality; even words that unobtrusively indicate temporal relations (‘when’ or ‘then’ or ‘next’) are rarely found in these cantos. For what is important in Pound’s eyes are the eternal principles being revealed, not the historical sequence that establishes those principles” (211). These “eternal principles” thus seem to stand outside of history, and the prominence of rulers and “great gentlemen” in the China Cantos comes to depend more on these principles than their particular deeds. These principles of good government are repeatedly linked to a vision of a permanent agrarian cycle: one dynasty rises out of its closeness to the rites of nature, then falls when it loses that closeness, to be replaced by a new dynasty that has rediscovered the old wisdom: “‘Yao and Chun have returned’ / sang the farmers / ‘Peace and abundance bring virtue’” (53/268). The opening of Canto 53, which deals with the origins of China as a coherent political entity, affirms a link between the mythical early rulers of China and the eternal cycles of agriculture: they are represented as the

founders of an agrarian way of life that persists without substantive alteration for millennia:

YEOU taught men to break branches  
Seu Gin set up the stage and taught barter,  
taught the knotting of cords  
Fou Hi taught men to grow barley  
2837 ante Christum  
and they know still where his tomb is  
by the high cypress between the strong walls.  
the FIVE grains, said Chin Nong, that are  
wheat, rice, millet, *gros blé* and chick peas  
and made a plough that is used five thousand years (53/262)

Pound's longstanding attraction to Chinese culture brings an idyllic dimension to his understanding of language. Bakhtin describes "a third distinctive feature of the idyll, closely linked with the first: the conjoining of human life with the life of nature, the unity of their rhythm, the common language used to describe phenomena of nature and the events of human life. Of course in the idyll, this common language has become in large part purely metaphorical and only to an insignificant degree (most of all in the agricultural idyll) retains anything of the actual about it" (226). The idyllic space, with its concurrent "unity of the life of generations" (225), makes possible an experience of time that is not historical but conjoined with the "rhythm" of nature. The result is a "common language" at least metaphorically adequate to both natural and cultural phenomena, and thus capable of mediating between them. A genuine and non-metaphorical common language of this sort would create a genuine and non-metaphorical unity of nature and culture; it would be the language of Eden. While effectively banning the possibility of Edenic language, Bakhtin does suggest that the "agricultural idyll," comes closest to achieving it.<sup>11</sup> This has important implications for Pound's embrace of the ideogram and what he saw as its capacity not just for

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<sup>11</sup> The agricultural idyll is not identical with the classical genre of georgic; however, in Pound's hands the idyll tends to take on the didactic tone we associate with georgic.

representing reality more accurately, but for improving and rectifying it. In *ABC of Reading* he offers his best-known example of the ideogrammic method as that which draws a general idea from concrete particulars:

But when the Chinaman wanted to make a picture of something more complicated, or of a general idea, how did he go about it?

He is to define red. How can he do it in a picture that isn't painted in red paint?

He puts (or his ancestor put) together the abbreviated pictures of

ROSE

CHERRY

IRON RUST

FLAMINGO

That, you see, is very much the kind of thing a biologist does (in a very much more complicated way) when he gets together a few hundred or thousand slides, and picks out what is necessary for his general statement. (21-22)

Though the example Pound offers here does not correspond to any actual Chinese character, it is descriptive of his nominalist technique in the *China Cantos*: a presentation of numerous “slides” (events and persons from Chinese history) intended to make a “general statement” about the values of permanence, stability, and good government that “China” represents for Pound. The role of the ideogrammic method for Pound is summarized in what we might call the master ideogram of the *cheng ming*, the rectification of names that is the necessary prerequisite for both political order and accurate knowledge: “wishing to attain precise verbal definitions, they set to extend their knowledge to the utmost. This completion of knowledge is rooted in

sorting things into organic categories” (Cookson 26). Pound’s ideogrammic or constellary method, which he is quick to ally with the science of biology (particularly in the form of his hero Louis Agassiz), is depicted as the means toward “organic categories,” themselves implicitly opposed to the deadness of abstraction and the corruption of language associated with capitalist modes of distribution and usury. For the China Cantos, Pound intends a “general statement” of the Confucian ethos of government, securely anchored in both human and external nature (that is, in feudal agrarianism) yet somehow capable of entering and revising Western history. Beyond the China Cantos, Pound’s goal is the most general of statements: a new totality.

The basic paradox of Pound’s method in *The Cantos* is that a syntactically underdetermined collage of elements and discourses—the technique of modernist inorganicism by which individual components are not subdued to the single overdetermining whole of the artwork—is intended to produce organic categories evolved from its acutely disparate elements. In other words, Pound’s epic is intended to remain inorganic only while in progress, its components suspended in apprehension of the messianic moment of the work’s completion *as* a work. The “periplum, not as land looks on a map / but as sea bord seen by men sailing” (59/324) can only function *like* a map, like a whole, when the circle is completed. At that moment *The Cantos* are to be retroactively transformed into the new “paideuma,” at the core of which will be the agrarian values of the China Cantos. The nostalgic turn of Pound’s thinking points us toward the idyll, a fantasy of the total restoration of an organic and traditional life, rather than toward a utopian future driven by Benjaminian memories of the wreckage and injustice of the past.

Bakhtin describes several subcategories of idyll, and it is the idyll of agricultural labor that he privileges for its remnants of “folkloric time,” which as we

have seen is Bakhtin's own fantasy of a wholly communal life prior to the division of labor and the abstracting tendencies of capitalism:

This form comes closest to achieving folkloric time; here the ancient matrices are revealed most fully and with the greatest possible actuality. This is explained by the fact that this form of the idyll uses as its model not the conventional pastoral life (which, after all, exists nowhere in such a form) but rather draws upon the real life of the agricultural laborer under conditions of feudal or post-feudal society—although this life is to one degree or another idealized and sublimated (the degree of this idealization varies widely). The *labor* aspect of this idyll is of special importance (present already in Virgil's *Georgics*); it is the agricultural-labor element that creates a *real* link and common bond between the phenomena of nature and the events of human life (as distinct from the *metaphorical* link of the love idyll). Moreover—and this is especially important—agricultural labor transforms all the events of everyday life, stripping them of that private petty character obtaining when man is nothing but consumer; what happens rather is that they are turned into essential life *events*. Thus people consume the produce of their own labor; the produce is figurally linked with the productive process, in it—in this produce—the sun, the earth and the rain are actually present (not merely in some system of metaphorical links). (226-7, italics in original)

The state of idyllic life achieved through the “*real* link” that is agricultural labor bears the traces of the story of unalienated labor told by the young Karl Marx in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*:

It is just in the working-up of the objective world, therefore, that man first really proves himself to be a *species being*. This production is his active species life. Through and because of this production, nature appears as *his* work and his reality. The object of labour is, therefore, the *objectification of man's species life*: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created. In tearing away from man the object of his production, therefore, estranged labour tears from him his *species life*, his real species objectivity, and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him.

(Tucker 62-63, italics in original)

In the Marxian idyll before capitalism, human beings enjoy a “species being” in which “Life itself appears only as *a means to life*” and man’s “own life is an object for him” (62). The texture of such life is visible in Bakhtin’s description of the idyllic chronotope: the rhythmic, seasonal demands of agricultural labor mediate the human being’s relation to “his inorganic body” (that is, nature) so that “the sun, the earth and the rain are actually present” (Bakhtin 227). Fealty to the rhythms of agricultural production also transform consumption: by consuming only the products of their own labor the citizens of the agricultural idyll “figurally” attach the process of production to its produce. In other words, they preserve its use-value: “produce” is the state of goods before their fall into the commodity form. The agricultural idyll’s “actuality” derives from its close imitation of “the real life of the agricultural laborer under conditions of feudal or post-feudal society,” whereas the strictly “conventional pastoral life” can make no such claims for its own historicity.

The “actuality” of unalienated agricultural labor is the master metaphor or overdetermining trope of the Bakhtinian idyll, behaving rather like a Derridean “transcendental signified”<sup>12</sup> in that it guarantees that nature in the idyll is “actually present (not merely in some system of metaphorical links)” (Bakhtin 227). For Bakhtin, pastoral (the type of the “love idyll”) depicts a *merely* metaphorical relation between “the phenomena of nature and the events of human life” (227). Such metaphors are fatally underdetermined, with attempts to “enrich” them only causing further impoverishment to the “actuality” represented by the idyll: “These elements— isolated, impoverished, trivialized—in order to retain their significance in narrative must undergo one or another form of sublimation, a metaphorical broadening of their significance (at the expense of links that had been previously actual, i.e., not metaphorical); their metaphorical enrichment is purchased at the expense of any dim traces of the past that might still remain” (215). The language of the idyll is for Bakhtin founded on the metaphysics of agricultural labor, which is a metaphysics of presence. While not actually written in the Edenic language that could serve as the vanishing mediator between nature and culture, the idyllic chronotope does offer the image of a life in which such a language could be possible. Its meaning is underwritten by a form of productive labor that preserves nature *as* nature and man *as* man, the latter existing neither as an exploited/exploiting producer nor as passive consumer.

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<sup>12</sup> “Peirce goes very far in the direction that I have called the de-construction of the transcendental signified, which, at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign. I have identified logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for such a signified. Now Peirce considers the indefiniteness of reference as the criterion that allows us to recognize that we are indeed dealing with a system of signs. *What broaches the movement of signification is what makes its interruption impossible. The thing itself is a sign.*” Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, 1966): 49, italics in original.

Outside the idyll normal conditions of history and the evolving capitalist relations of production remain in place. The idyll’s potential for the critique of those conditions derives from its mode of distantiation—its separation from the history of unrepeatable events—and also from its distinction from “the conventional pastoral life (which, after all, exists nowhere in such a form).” Both of these separations hinge on the inclusion within the chronotope of a specifically agricultural labor in which nature is “actually present”—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that such labor presents a version of nature capable of founding a social order:

The bull runs blind on the sword, *naturans*  
 To the cave art thou called, Odysseus,  
 By Molü hast thou respite for a little,  
 By Molü art thou freed from the one bed  
                   that thou may’st return to another  
 The stars are not in her counting,  
                   To her they are but wandering holes.  
 Begin thy plowing  
 When the Pleiades go down to their rest,  
 Begin thy plowing  
 40 days are they under seabord,  
 Thus do in fields by seabord  
 And in valleys winding down toward the sea.  
 When the cranes fly high  
                   think of plowing. (47/237)

The bull must follow its nature even to destruction, but Odysseus, the hero of Pound’s periplum, is called upon to exercise his will for the good of nature. The static, mythic nature of the early Cantos here becomes the potential agent of a restored historical order in the form of the herb “Molü,” *μδλν*, that in Book 10 of *The Odyssey* is given to Odysseus by Hermes as a means of resisting Circe’s transformative magic. Nature supplemented by the divine frees Odysseus from Circe’s sterile bed to continue his quest home to Penelope’s (and we are perhaps meant to remember that Penelope’s bed is literally anchored by a mighty tree). Circe does not apprehend the stars as stars, only “wandering holes”—a false sexualization of nature that recalls the

unnatural and pestilent swamps of earlier Cantos. The didactic lines that follow are adapted from Hesiod's *Works and Days*, which in this context become an admonishment to Odysseus to do his "plowing" in the fields of home—that is, Penelope—rather than with Circe. Woman as nature *and* as anti-nature are present in this passage, the good and bad objects of Odysseyan labor. Although sexualized, such labor is a serious business and lacks the aura of nature as a scene for erotic play that we saw in Canto 20. It is the idyll as scene for a potential history, not the pastoral song that withdraws from history.

Bakhtin's distinction between the agricultural idyll and the "conventional" pastoral hinges upon the role of labor and the differing degrees of actuality in their representative spaces. The agricultural labor celebrated in the *Georgics* is mostly absent from the *Eclogues*; the herdsman's labor in the earlier poems is not only less organized and sophisticated, but is barely represented at all. Instead, the *Eclogues* show us shepherds at play, putting work aside in order to take part in singing contests. The nature of space in the *Eclogues* also differs significantly from the space of the *Georgics*; while as separated and restricted as the *Georgics*' idyllic space, the *Eclogue*'s pastoral space lacks the latter's "familiarity." The *Georgics* are a didactic poem set in Virgil's native Mantua, the "Saturnian land" that Virgil celebrates for its fertility, and the figure of the farmer is likewise praised for his productive labor in accordance with the dictates of Jove, a way of life bitterly contrasted with the culture of consumption associated with the city-dweller. Labor may guarantee the greater authenticity of the idyllic space versus the urban, but equally crucial is Virgil's use of recognizable locations and landmarks. By contrast, the *Eclogues* are set in a manifestly imaginary "Arcadia," and the poems' congruence with actuality is strictly metaphorical, as when Virgil transforms himself into Tityrus, singing of his gratitude to the "god" who returned his expropriated land to him. This exposes once again the

crucial mediating function of labor between the actual and the metaphorical. In the idyll, the representation of labor guarantees the kernel of actuality within the text, underwriting a metaphysics of presence that conserves use-value. In pastoral, labor is specifically excluded from representation in favor of song, and not just song but the representation of a scene in which singing takes place. Insofar as labor appears in pastoral, it is metaphorized into the labor of song-making.

Versus the actual Mantua and actual productive labor, then, pastoral gives us a fantastic Arcadia and a form of labor which is a wholly non-productive expenditure—except insofar as it is linked, as poetry, to the labor of creating Arcadia itself. The pastoral image is weaker than the idyllic one because of its greater distance from actuality, but that same distance increases its autonomy. This increased relative autonomy from actuality is what gives pastoral its negative potential: a capacity for the critique of normative social and productive relations that is much greater than the idyll's. The increased reliance on what Bakhtin calls “the metaphorical” throws pastoral back upon the resources of a poetic language not confined to the accurate representation of a particular locale or particular relations. Arcadia cannot be located in an actual precapitalist past as in Bakhtin's notion of the “folkloric time” approximated by the idyll. The force of the pastoral image comes less from its positive and conventional representation of a life that “exists nowhere in such a form” but from the actuality negated by that image. The pressure exerted by actual conditions manifests not in a particular representation but in the metaphoric language that describes a balance between nature and culture that emphatically does not exist in the world that pastoral retreats from.

In Virgil's poetry the language of the *Eclogues* is more sophisticated and ambiguous in its approach to the world it separates itself from than that of the *Georgics*. The withdrawal from history in the *Eclogues* is complexly represented in

Eclogue I by the opposed fates of Meliboeus, who has been exiled from the pastoral condition, and Tityrus, who continues to enjoy his land thanks to a special dispensation from a “god” in the unnamed capital. This tension is unresolved by the end of Eclogue I so that it haunts the sequence as a whole. No such tension or ambiguity troubles the rhetorical surface of the *Georgics*, a celebration not just of labor but of property rights and the poet’s place within his society’s hierarchical ideology—a place that the writing of the poem is intended to make more secure. Labor guarantees presence in the *Georgics*, but the *Eclogues* abandon themselves to metaphoric play and therefore, though less “useful” than the didactic *Georgics*, they have managed to evade the totalizing reading of any given ideology for thousands of years. Even the Christian appropriation of the “nobler music” of Eclogue IV has never been entirely convincing, given the vagueness of its prophecy and the complex interplay of forces in the sequence as a whole.<sup>13</sup> Yet the Christians were right to see in that eclogue a glimmer of messianic potential in the form of the negative: it is only there that Virgil permits himself to imagine the overthrow of what exists in favor of a new reality. Although both types of poem are nostalgic in their orientation, the agricultural idyll stresses continuity with a history that is integrated into the values of the present, and so conservative in the strictest sense. It is the sheerly imaginary time of pastoral that cannot be integrated into any official history; instead it ruptures the public present with its appeal to the individual reader’s ontogenetic past.

The logic of the idyll is therefore compatible with Pound’s utopian ambitions, at least as they are expressed in the *China Cantos* with their accompanying unhistorical conviction that the values they espouse of right government through right naming are sufficient to overcome the evils of Western modernity. Pound persistently

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<sup>13</sup> This is the basic argument of Annabel Paterson’s book *Pastoral and Ideology*.

refuses to recognize the degradation of the values he associates with the ideogram and the *cheng ming* as produced by the complex dialectical movement of capitalism which entails commodification and reification; instead only the bad judgment and evil will of a few individuals in high places (international bankers, later Churchill and Roosevelt) “sin against nature” so that “Corpses are set to banquet / at behest of usura” (45/230, 231). Pound seems to believe that his care for history insulates him from conventional pastoralism, since in his prose he expresses contempt for what he calls “the simple lifers” (“Mang Tsze,” SP 89), while ascribing recognizably idyllic values to Confucius and his followers, whose cyclical vision of nature as “This constant pageant of the sun, of process” (93) is apparently sufficient to oppose the linear, goal-oriented ethos associated with greed, ruinous taxes, and “busy-ness.”<sup>14</sup> For Pound, unalienated labor could simply be willed into being: as he claims in “ABC of Economics,” “The minute I cook my own dinner or nail four boards into a chair, I escape from the whole cycle of Marxian economics” (SP 239). Pound was incapable of understanding the concept of abstract labor except as the jargon of social control; in the 1944 essay “Gold and Work,” he wrote, “Liberalism and Bolshevism are in intimate agreement in their fundamental contempt for the human personality. Stalin ‘disposes’ of forty truckloads of human ‘material’ for work on a canal. We find the liberals talking about the export of ‘labour’” (SP 342).<sup>15</sup> For Pound, nature is the final repository of value: “It should be remembered that the soil does not require monetary compensation for the wealth

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<sup>14</sup> Nor is Pound’s notion of the idyllic chronotope strictly Confucian, as this passage from the 1940 essay “European Paideuma” shows: “The Lithuanian shout of ‘Ligo’ to a sun freed of its winter imprisonment, the maze-dances performed at Easter near Mycenae express an observance of, and belief in natural forces on which, ultimately, our whole existence depends. The changing seasons with all that they imply for us are the subject on the one hand of statistics, corners in wheat, planning commissions for the restriction of crops and Federal Relief (U.S.A.), on the other of observance, thankfulness, fear and a belief in the commonplace and ever-recurring miracle of growth” (*Machine Art* 131).

<sup>15</sup> Pound’s argument here anticipates Heidegger’s postwar view of capitalism and communism as both being assimilated to the more significant force of “planetary technology”: “Capitalism and state-communism are merely variants in a common technicity and exploitation of nature” (Steiner 138).

extracted from it. With her wonderful efficiency nature sees to it that the circulation of material capital and its fruits is maintained, and that what comes out of the soil goes back into the soil with majestic rhythm, despite human interference” (SP 346). Yet Pound’s overwhelming concern for production, particularly artistic production, means we cannot take his refusal to accept the labor theory of value on its face. It is rather that labor is incorporated into nature: reversing Bakhtin’s priorities, Pound’s concept of nature guarantees the “actuality” and presence of labor rather than the other way around, while unnatural usury degrades labor into mere “interference” (see Pound’s claim to be able to judge an artwork by the level of usury in the era in which it was produced). Nature as the primary source of values is the foundation upon which Pound attempts to build his idyllic utopia.

### **3. *Idyll and Techne***

What we might call Pound’s “idylology” emerges most strongly with his celebration of what he considers to have been the ideal bank, the Sienese Monte dei Paschi or “Mount of the Pastures.” Instead of practicing the non-productive usury Pound attributed to large banks and international financiers, its capital was derived directly from the “somewhat unhandy collateral” of the pasturelands to its south by an act of Cosimo, the first Duke of Tuscany:

That is to say, Siena had grazing lands down toward Grosseto, and the grazing rights worth 10,000 ducats a year. On this basis taking it for his main security, Cosimo underwrote a capital of 200,000 ducats, to pay 5 per cent to the shareholders, and to be lent at 5½ per cent; overhead kept down to a minimum; salaries at the minimum and all excess of profit over that to go to hospitals and works for the benefit of the people of Siena. That was in the first years of the seventeenth century,

and that bank is open today. It outlasted Napoleon. You can open an account there tomorrow.

And the lesson is the very basis of solid banking. The CREDIT rests *in ultimate* on the ABUNDANCE OF NATURE, on the growing grass that can nourish the living sheep.

And the moral is the INTENTION. It was not for the conquerors immediate short-sighted profit, but to restart the life and productivity of Siena, that this bank was contrived. (“Banks,” *Selected Prose* 270, italics and small caps in original)

Imagining that only the sheer “abundance of nature” and the right “intention” are necessary to overthrow the manifold evils of modern civilization, the Fascist ethos of blood and soil is darkly visible behind this core statement of Pound’s idyllology. In fact, his desire to attribute the malign effects of a complex capitalist world-system to the single cause of “usury” is itself a kind of inverted pastoral, in which the “unnatural” act of usury negates all good and “natural” efforts at artmaking and institution building, even material production itself. Usury, for Pound, is the “counterforce” that threatens the idyllic order represented by the Sienese bank.

In his essay, “An Introduction to the Economic Nature of the United States,” first published in Italian in 1944, Pound equates usury with “waste”—the destruction of the environment:

The American tragedy is a continuous history of waste—waste of the natural abundance first, then waste of the new abundance offered by the machine, and then by machines, no longer isolated, but correlated and centuplicating the creative power of human labour.

The improvident Americans killed bison without thought of protecting them. Forests were cut down without thought of

conservation. This had no immediate effect on the prosperity of the inhabitants, because of nature's abundance. The usurers, now called financiers, plotted against abundance.... Polite society did not consider usury as Dante did, that is, damned to the same circle of Hell as the sodomites, both acting against the potential abundance of nature. (SP 176)

In this passage the "new abundance offered by the machine" is effectively assimilated into the "natural abundance" that the usurers plot against. Nature is the foundation of value; usury destroys value: usury's place as the root of all evil in Pound's historiography is confirmed by being the polar opposite of the spirit of abundance that Pound finds in nature. For Pound, the word "usury" is an emblem of inaccuracy, filth, and degeneracy, a largely Jewish blight on Western culture that must be fought by Pound's hygienic language ("purifying the language of the tribe"), rooted in his neoPlatonic notion of light as the essence of being ("OMNIA, / all things that are are lights" [C 84, 449]) and knowledge ("The book should be a ball of light in one's hand"). But the figure of usury as disease is less prominent in Canto 45, the "usury Canto," which emphasizes the damage usury does to a continuum of production founded upon the abundance of nature. From that starting point the Canto deliberately elides the difference between agricultural production and cultural/artistic production:

with usura, sin against nature,  
is thy bread ever more of stale rags  
is thy bread dry as paper,  
with no mountain wheat, no strong flour  
with usura the line grows thick  
with usura is no clear demarcation  
and no man can find site for his dwelling.  
Stonecutter is kept from his stone  
weaver is kept from his loom (C 45, 229)

Usury appears as a force that cuts people off from the elemental materiality of nature as signified by "bread," "mountain wheat," and "stone," as well as the

craftsmanship that characterizes stonecutting and weaving. Although elsewhere Pound indicts usury for its malign effects on production in general, the modern industrial mode of production is suppressed in this Canto in favor of nostalgia for older, artisanal forms. The damage usury does to “dwelling” affects both the physical dwelling places of people (the Canto begins, “With *Usura* // With usura hath no man a house of good stone” [C 45, 229]) and dwelling as cultural achievement in the Heideggerian sense, the dwelling that sets up a way of life in the productive rift between world and earth. Pound affirms continuity between the domestic production that characterizes human dwelling and the production of high art by moving without a break from the archetypal “stonecutter,” “weaver,” and “spinner” into a series of proper names signifying high cultural achievement:

Usura is a murrain, usura  
 blunteth the needle in the maid’s hand  
 and stoppeth the spinner’s cuning. Pietro Lombardo  
 came not by usura  
 Duccio came not by usura  
 nor Pier della Francesca; Zuan Bellin’ not by usura  
 nor was ‘La Calunnnia’ painted.  
 Came not by usura Angelico; came not Ambrogio Praedis,  
 Came no church of cut stone signed: *Adamo me fecit*. (C 45, 229-30)

“Adam made me”: the individual’s stamp on architecture, which in turn sets up a cultural world around it (as in Heidegger’s famous example of the Greek temple in “The Origin of the Work of Art”), is stamped out by usury.<sup>16</sup> By implication, naming itself—the fundamental poetic, Adamic act—is obstructed and degraded. The attention Pound pays to precision of naming is more than aesthetic: “the Confucian answer when asked about the first task of government: ‘call things by their right names’” (“Mang Tsze,” SP 85). Naming, artisanal and artistic making, and good government

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<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere in *The Cantos* it is mass production rather than usury that gets blamed for the degradation of architecture as cultural mainstay: “So he said, looking at the signed columns in San Zeno / ‘how the hell can we get any architecture / when we order our columns by the gross?’” (C 78, 500).

all derive in Pound's view from an organic, rooted *techne* that works in harmony with nature as opposed to the challenging, abstract "dissection" of nature that Pound associates with Aristotle and "Greek philosophy" rather than modern technology or instrumental reason as such:<sup>17</sup>

Greek philosophy was almost an attack upon nature.... The curse of European thought appeared between the Nichomachean notes and the Magna Moralia. Aristotle (as recorded in the earlier record) began his list of mental processes with Τεχνη, and the damned college parrots omitted it. This was done almost before the poor bloke was cold in his coffin.

Greek philosophy, and European in its wake, degenerated into an attack on mythology and mythology is, perforce, totalitarian. I mean that it tries to find an expression for reality without over-simplification, and without scission, you can examine a living animal, but at certain points dissection is compatible only with death. (86-87)

Pound's desire to preserve the "totalitarian" nature of myth is equated with the desire to preserve nature (the "living animal") from dissection: a Romantic gesture recalling Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned." At the same time, Pound's idea of myth is made compatible with his Agassizian notion of science as the accurate description of things. In his 1930 essay "How to Write," Pound ascribes to Ernest Fenollosa a crucial distinction between "logic" and "science": "The main dissociation in this essay [‘The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry’] is between the Chinese and occidental modes of thought. Fenollosa attacks logic in favour of science. The logic

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<sup>17</sup> In this respect Pound's conclusions closely correspond with Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics. See Maria Luisa Ardizzone's introduction to Ezra Pound, *Machine Art & Other Writings: The Lost Thought of the Italian Years* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), especially pp. 4 – 14.

appears to him occidental and the scientific approach to knowledge appears to him to be also the poetic and to be the way inherent in the Chinese ideograph as distinct from occidental phonetic writing.... [T]he European mind moves from the concrete known to the general and to the still more general unknown” (91). Later in the same essay he cites the famous story of Agassiz and the fish in which he makes plain his objection is not to dissection but to shortcuts taken in perception: “Agassiz did not change the fish; he sent the student back to dissect it and to ‘look at it.’... It is not the quantity of matter that passes under the eye of the observer but the intensity of the observation that counts” (93). This emphasis on intensity ultimately supercedes accuracy: “I don’t know whether I read the *Odyssey* as the Homeric Greeks read it. For the purpose of enjoying its rhythm, it does not matter one tittle whether one reads it with philologic correctness; what matters is getting from it a fecund and exciting rhythmic sensation” (93). Pound’s “science” becomes indistinguishable from myth understood as the residue of intense perception, which it is the poet’s task to “recover.” That impulse Pound recognizes, at least negatively, as a pastoral one:

Lévy-Bruhl points out the savage’s lack of power to generalize. He has forty verbs where we have two or three verbs and some adverbs. The savage language grades down into pantomime and mimicry.

What Lévy-Bruhl says about the verbs of savages, what Fenollosa says about verbs in Chinese, what I had written about Dante’s verbs before I had heard of Fenollosa all joins up. The good writer need not throw over anything humanity has acquired but he will in the measure of his genius try to recover the vividness of Dante, Li Po and the bushman. The savage to whom the wood or the bend in the river is not a wood or a bend but one particular stretch of wood, one particular bend in that river.

Sneers at “mouldy reminiscences of Pan” do not cover the matter. (90)

No primitivist, Pound found in Confucianism a system that effectively elevates a practical *techne* derived from intense observation into a mythological power all its own. The peasant virtues of Confucius are identical with the *virtu* of the great leader, whose job is to nurture his people as they nurture the fields. The tension we might expect between ruler and ruled is covered up by idyllology, as suggested by Pound’s translation of a Chinese folk song:

Sun up; work  
sundown; to rest  
dig well and drink of the water  
dig field; eat of the grain  
Imperial power is? and to us what is it? (49/245)

Published in 1937 as part of *The Fifth Decad of Cantos*, two years after Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia, Pound’s disavowal of “Imperial power” seems disingenuous at best. Yet the passage appears in the so-called Seven Lakes Canto—what Cookson calls “The still centre of *The Cantos*,” intended by Pound to provide “a glimpse of paradise” (69), and it includes some of Pound’s most beautiful translations of Chinese poetry:

Comes then snow scur on the river  
And a world is covered with jade  
Small boat floats like a lantern,  
The flowing water clots as with cold. And at San Yin  
they are a people of leisure.  
Wild geese swoop to the sand-bar,  
Clouds gather about the hole of the window  
Broad water; geese line out with the autumn  
Rooks clatter over the fishermen’s lanterns  
A light moves on the north sky line;  
where the young boys prod stones for shrimp.  
In seventeen hundred came Tsing to these hill lakes.  
A light moves on the south sky line. (49.244-45)

As in Pound’s poem “Salutation,” the fishermen here serve as emblems of men living in harmony with nature, who in their happiness and leisure are akin to “the fish [that]

swim in the lake / and do not even own clothing” (*Poems* 265). This “still centre” is contrasted with a vision of the infamy of a government that turns natural abundance into debt:

State by creating riches shd. thereby get into debt?  
This is infamy; this is Geryon.  
This canal goes still to TenShi  
though the old king built it for pleasure (49.245)

The lines about the canal suggest a synthesis of the pastoral ideals of Kung and Tian: the “old king” distinguishes himself from “Geryon” by building it “for pleasure” rather than as an instrument of greed. In this context the “Sun up” folksong could reasonably be read as a protest against a state that manifests as “Imperial power” rather than as a generator of wealth for its people: greed and violence are always closely associated in Pound’s mind. Opposed to this is Pound’s belief in the ruler as artist: as he remarked in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, “I don’t believe any estimate of Mussolini will be valid unless it *starts* from his passion for construction. Treat him as *artifex* and all the details fall into place. Take him as anything save the artist and you will get muddled with contradictions” (34). Certainly this resembles the infamous aestheticization of politics that Walter Benjamin and others have attributed to Fascism, and masks the violence toward both nature and human beings that characterized Mussolini’s “art.” It also resembles a Marxian aestheticization of production in which the subject position that should be occupied by the proletariat is taken over by the individual ruler-producer. Douglas Mao has written of Pound’s repeated attempts “to accommodate mass production to a vision of all production as an organic positivity diametrically opposed to the barrenness of finance capital” (182) and the consequences of assigning the artisanal virtue of *techne* to rulers: “One lesson to be drawn here is thus that virtually the same take on subject-object relations that serves a Marxist politics when the normative subject is a member of the proletariat can be

absorbed by an anti-Marxist, and in this case lingeringly Fascist, agenda when the subject in question belongs to the class of rulers” (183).

Mao notes that Pound, in his eagerness to valorize any and all production over usury and the dangers of “CONTEMPLATIO” (85/566), is led toward “a gospel of action founded on historical continuity rather than rupture, and in particular upon an excision (from the center of historical inquiry) of attention to alterations in the conditions of production” (183). Pound’s willingness to efface the distinction he draws in the early Cantos between agricultural/artisanal modes of production and industrial production only heightens the ambiguous status of *techne*, which refers both to practical productive knowledge and to the know-how of the artist who assimilates “intellect” into “instinct”:

In Gourmont’s exposition [*Physique de l’Amour*] the instinct is not something opposed to intellect. Intellect is a sort of imperfect forerunner. After the intellect has worked on a thing long enough the knowledge becomes faculty. There is one immediate perception or capacity to act instead of a mass of ratiocination.

In art the *Kundiger*, the knower, is not the man who can analyze a work after it has been done; but the man who can go on from that work and do something different (different however slightly and with respect to whatever component he may happen to alter). (“How to Write,” 102)

Pound’s desire for the unity of word and thing (exemplified by the Chinese ideogram) is mirrored by his desire for the unity of “instinct” and “intellect” in the artist of *techne*, the *Kundiger*. An organicism of the object treated by *techne* will lead to a rediscovered organic unity in the subject. But there is a chicken-and-egg problem here in Pound’s representation of the artist as he who always already “knows”; the effect is

not so much as to valorize *techne* as generative of subjectivity, but to posit that knowing subjects are those who bring *techne* to bear. *Virtu* is an attribute, not an accomplishment. This backdoor elitism serves Pound's desire to have the artist's mode of production sublimate and replace the industrial worker's; and beyond this, to be identical to the statesman's mode of production or "faculty"—sovereignty. These modes are conflated into something Pound calls "the cultural heritage":

The fascist revolution was FOR the preservation of certain liberties and FOR the maintenance of a certain level of culture, certain standards of living, it was NOT a refusal to come down to a level of riches or poverty, but a refusal to surrender certain immaterial prerogatives, a refusal to surrender a great slice of the cultural heritage.

The "cultural heritage" as fountain of value in Douglas' economics is in process of superseding labour as the fountain of values, which it WAS in the time of Marx, or at any rate was in overwhelming proportion. (J/M 127)

Culture supplants labor as "the fountain of values" in the "fascist revolution," producer not of wealth, primarily, but "certain immaterial prerogatives." By conflating culture and labor under the sign of a preserving *techne*, Pound indicates his desire for the "organic positivity" of an idyllic economy, which he assimilates into Mussolini's concern "for Italy organic" (J/M 34). In such an economy agricultural labor is raised to the dignity of a cultural force that can reconcile humanity with nature, and creates a moral hierarchy that inverts the usual social norms, so that those who labor in the fields become superior to those who live in the cities and consume without producing anything themselves. In the idyll their labor sublimes nature, containing, overcoming, and preserving it: "it is the agricultural-labor element that creates a *real* link and common bond between the phenomena of nature and the events of human life"

(Bakhtin 227). The image of oxen under the olive trees becomes emblematic for Pound of the realization of idyllic values in Mussolini's Italy, overcoming or pushing under the Futurist-Fascist fetishization of technology:

Both [Mussolini] and T.J. [Thomas Jefferson] had sympathy with the beasts. They still plough with oxen in Italy and they say that the sentimental foreigner with his eye for the picturesque and the classic scholar who likes to be reminded of Virgil, etc., are not at the root of it. The *bue* IS indisputably *simpatico*. I don't believe even Marinetti can help liking the sight of a pair of grey oxen scrunching along under olive-trees, or lugging a plough up an almost vertical hillside. There are plenty of fields in Italy where a tractor would be little use and larger farm machinery no economy. (63-64)

Pound's expansive idea of *techne* in effect creates an empty signifier that can be occupied by the modes of production of the agricultural laborer, the artisan, the fine artist, and the political leader—effectively effacing the crucial differences between these modes and reducing (or elevating) both the political and economic spheres to the level of art. This is the same nostalgic gesture made by Heidegger toward the end of “The Question Concerning Technology”:

There was a time when it was not technology alone that bore the name *techne*. Once the revealing that brings forth truth into the splendor of radiant appearance was also called *techne*.

There was a time when the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called *techne*. The *poiesis* of the fine arts was also called *techne*.

At the outset of the destining of the West, in Greece, the arts soared to the supreme height of the revealing granted them. They

illuminated the presence [*Gegenwart*] of the gods and the dialogue of divine and human destinings. And art was called simply *techne*. It was a single, manifold revealing. It was pious, *promos*, i.e., yielding to the holding sway and the safekeeping of truthh.

The arts were not derived from the artistic. Artworks were not enjoyed aesthetically. Art was not a sector of cultural activity. (BW 339)

Heidegger's post-aesthetics rely on a nostalgic "origin" of the artwork in which art *is* origin (reading "the work of art" in the sense of the *task* of art), the name for the mode of revealing the epochal determinations of society. The explicitly religious artwork of the mythical past (namely Heidegger's example of the Greek temple in "The Origin of the Work of Art") is not an adjunct to economic or political activity, much less a commodity, but an event (*Ereignis*) that sets up the historical world that incorporates such activity. While it is impossible to return to the Greek temple (the gods have fled), Heidegger sees a "saving power" within the "danger" of technology; namely, a recovery of language's capacity for disclosing truth (its *Sagen* or saying) that will challenge the deadly technological logic of enframing (*das Gestell*). In the case of poetry, that means the rediscovery of *poiesis*, the genus of revealing or disclosure of which *techne* is a species and whose most characteristic modern form, technological enframing, threatens to efface and replace it: "[T]he revealing that holds sway throughout modern technology does not unfold into a bringing-forth in the sense of *poiesis*" (BW 320). *Poiesis* is a form of mimesis in that it imitates the self-unfolding action of nature or *physis*: "*Physis*... the arising of something from out of itself, is a bringing-forth, *poiesis*. *Physis* is indeed *poiesis* in the highest sense" (BW 317).

As a mode of *poiesis*, *techne* might also stake a claim to this sort of imitation; but Pound's conflation of artistic *techne* with that of the artisan, peasant, and

maximum leader tends more to degrade the former than elevate the latter. Pound's admiration for the Kung who wrote on the bamboo leaves cannot be separated from his admiration for the Mussolini who drained the swamps and went on to impose a violent order on his people. Pound's nature does not escape enframing, a calculative ordering hysterically oriented around the "anti-nature" it wishes to expel figured as usury. In that respect Pound is all too ready to accept the "distance" from nature that Heidegger associates with technological enframing. The middle Cantos devote themselves to "building" [*bauen*] in the sense of the creation of an edifice, a static agrarian paradise in which cultural monuments are planted. The political and actual architecture of the Fascist state Pound supported is forgetful of what Heidegger calls "dwelling" in his 1951 essay, "Building Dwelling Thinking":

The old word *bauen*, which says that *is* insofar as he *dwells*, this word *bauen*, however, *also* means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine. Such building only takes care—it tends the growth that ripens into fruit of its own accord. Building in the sense of preserve and nurturing is not making anything. Shipbuilding and temple-building, on the other hand, do in a certain way make their own works. Here building, in contrast with cultivating, is a constructing. Both modes of building—building as cultivating, Latin *colere*, *cultura*, and building as the raising up of edifices, *aedificare*—are comprised with genuine building, that is, dwelling. Building as dwelling, that is, as being on the earth, however, remains for man's everyday experience that which is from the outset "habitual"—we inhabit it, as our language says so beautifully: it is the *Gewohnte*. For this reason it recedes behind the manifold ways in which dwelling is accomplished, the activities of cultivation and

construction. These activities later claim the name of *bauen*, building, and with it the matter of building, exclusively for themselves. The proper sense of *bauen*, namely dwelling, falls into oblivion. (BW 349-350)

Dwelling, *wohnen*, which according to Heidegger derives from the Gothic *wunian*, “to be at peace,” and which also relates to *Wonne*, “delight,” more resembles the practice of Tian letting his music mingle with the bamboo leaves than that of Kung writing upon them: it conceives of the earth not as a site for production but “a *Spielraum*, literally, ‘a space in which to play’” (Steiner 149). We might accuse Tian of sentimentality, just as Lawrence Rainey calls Pound’s pastoral images “faux bijoux” and Hubert L. Dreyfus refers to the nostalgic “style of Black Forest kitsch for which [Heidegger] is infamous.”<sup>18</sup> But if we take dwelling and *poiesis* seriously as “the letting happen of the advent of the truth of beings” (BW 197), we can attempt to account for *The Pisan Cantos* as a rupture or break within *The Cantos* as a whole: the supplanting of totalitarian idyll by a negative pastoral.

#### ***4. Pisa and After, or: Pretty Green B(l)anks***

*The Cantos* are a poem containing history. But as Dasenbrock puts it, by the end of the Middle Cantos Pound has wagered on an inversion of the situation: that history should contain the poem. “He thus cannot give his poem a finished shape contrary to that found in history, for to do so would be to aestheticize his vision of history, to deny it its descriptive force. He thus cannot impose a form on his poem; it must find its form in the form of history. In short, Mussolini must bring order out of

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<sup>18</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus “Highway Bridges and Feasts: Heidegger and Borgmann on How to Affirm Technology.” Web page for the Department of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, 2004 ([http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~hdreyfus/html/paper\\_highway.html](http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~hdreyfus/html/paper_highway.html)): visited 6/16/05.



converts the historical into experience. The overwhelming negativity of his desperate situation at Pisa—his literal exposure to the elements—becomes the necessary site for a new kind of poetic dwelling in what we might call the memory of the present. This is signified in the passage that closes the first Pisan Canto, where the paradisaical “crystal jet,” reminiscent of “the city of Dioce whose terraces are the colour of stars” (74/11) is transformed from an object of shaping aspiration into a “property of the mind”:

This liquid is certainly a  
   property of the mind  
 nec accidens est   but an element  
   in the mind’s make-up  
 est agens and functions       dust to a fountain pan otherwise  
   Hast ‘ou seen the rose in the steel dust  
   (or swansdown ever?)  
 so light is the urging, so ordered the dark petals of iron  
 we who have passed over Lethe. (74/834-842)

The famous image of “the rose in the steel dust” intimates the discovery of form in a fleeting phenomenon of nature: it is an image of *poiesis* in action both in terms of the pattern created by magnetism and the mind’s “liquid” perception of that pattern as being like a rose, in itself symbolic of lyric poetry. This perception is discoverable only by “we who have passed over Lethe,” a line that follows numerous vectors of meaning. In the sense of Lethe as the river of forgetfulness, this final line of Canto 74 suggests the death of history as Pound has known it: that is, as a force to shape his poem and which his poem hoped to shape in turn. But as Richard Sieburth notes, quoting Singleton, in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* the river Lethe is placed at the summit of Mount Purgatory: “On this side it descends with virtue that takes from one the memory of sin; on the other side it restores the memory of every good deed. Here Lethe, so on the other side Eunoe it is called; and it works not if first it be not tasted on this side and on that” (PC 130n842). It is tempting to see a wish for absolution here, and certainly there are passages in *The Pisan Cantos* that support such an interpretation. But the purgatorial Lethe also represents a boundary that

metamorphoses the psyche of he who crosses it by transforming his relation to his own past—that is, his own experience. To forget the sins of one’s past is to lose a very significant portion of it; to remember only good deeds is to enter the eternal present of paradise with the self in a fragmentary state. Those who have crossed over Lethe are no longer identical with themselves. It is this experience of radical alterity that prepares Pound for his new relation to nature-as-negativity, rediscovered in *The Pisan Cantos* as the groundless ground of any possible paradise.

Pound’s experiences of nature at Pisa are unprecedented in *The Cantos*. From being almost always mediated by some sort of mythical, originary setting, natural phenomena now appear directly to Pound himself, who is represented as a person in the act of writing in the present tense of the poem, rather than the abstracted and impersonal “ego scriptor cantilenae” (C 62/350). The confused and violent jungle imagery of Canto 20 and Odysseus’s being called to the plough in Canto 47 both treat nature as mythic and symbolic, a site demanding mastery through the poetico-political labor of *techne*. Pound’s representation of a wasp building its nest in Canto 83 is fundamentally different: his close, largely empirical observation is an act of *saving* in Heidegger’s sense: “To save properly means to set something free into its own essence. To save the earth is more than to exploit it or even wear it out. Saving the earth does not master the earth and does not subjugate it, which is merely one step from boundless spoliation” (BW 352). In this case, Pound’s saving of nature, rather than using or exploiting it, saves him in turn:

and Brother Wasp is building a very neat house  
of four rooms, one shaped like a squat indian bottle  
La vespa, *la vespa*, mud, swallow system  
so that dreaming of Bracelonde and of Perugia  
and the great fountain in the Piazza  
or of old Bulagaio’s cat that with a well timed leap  
could turn the lever-shaped door handle  
It comes over me that Mr. Walls must be a ten-strike  
with the signorinas

and in the warmth after chill sunrise  
an infant, green as new grass,  
has stuck its head or tip  
out of Madame La Vespa's bottle

mint springs up again  
in spite of Jones' rodents  
as had the clover by the gorilla cage  
with a four-leaf

When the mind swings by a grass-blade  
an ant's forefoot shall save you  
the clover leaf smells and tastes as its flower (83/127-146)

In the first movement of this passage Pound's empirical description of the wasp's activities is supplemented by a close attention to language that simultaneously invites intimacy with nature ("Brother Wasp") and preserves its alterity by shifting into Italian where the masculine "Brother Wasp" is reconfigured into the feminine "La vespa, *la vespa*." Pound's wasp is practically a dialectical image: the use of Italian is an intimate gesture, domesticating the wasp in the language of "la pastorella." At the same time, it estranges the wasp slightly from the reader of English, preserving it from his grasp. The proximity of "mud," the material of the wasp's nest, signals a transformation in Pound's relation to what he quotes Napoleon as having called, "The fifth element" (C 34/166): no longer signifying an unhygienic "anti-Nature," mud becomes the material on which nature itself, in the form of the wasp, practices its *poiesis*. The sudden shift into "dreaming of Bracelonde and Perugia" combines an allusion to the mythical forest of Arthurian romance with the actual memory of an Italian province; no longer Pound's primary mode of apprehending and arranging nature, the mythical is now just one element in an elegiacal constellation of memory that itself returns momentarily to the animal world. Both cat and wasp are engaged in acts of opening and disclosure: the cat opens the door, the infant wasp, "green as new grass" (and note the empirical care taken with "head *or* tip" [emphasis added]),

emerges from “Madame La Vespa’s bottle.” Throughout the passage so far a careful distance has been preserved between the actions of animals and the human world, a distance that regulates their relation or “extimacy.”<sup>19</sup> It is this distance, preserved by the act of respecting the object’s otherness, that provides nature with its own “saving” power for the poet’s mind. The human cultivation of nature can easily go awry, as the reference to “Jones’ rodents” (suggesting a parody of shepherding) indicates; but preserving a space for *physis* makes it possible for “mint [to spring] up again.” Mint, we may recall, is one of the fragments of paradise Pound describes in the first Pisan Canto, notable for their homeliness when compared with the grandeur of “the city of Dioce”:

Le paradis n’est pas artificiel  
 but spezzato apparently  
 it exists only in fragments unexpected excellent sausage,  
 the smell of mint, for example,  
 Ladro the night cat (74/456-460)

The sprouting of mint and clover, tiny events in the context of “the gorilla cage,” take on a numinous significance which yet avoids the grandiosity of Pound’s utopian gestures (ubiquitous in the earlier Cantos and still sporadic here). As Dasenbrock suggests, such details resist assimilation into any single ideogrammic generality: “what generalities can be born from particulars like the excellence of sausage and the smell of mint? In Pisa paradise exists in fragments, and these fragments are neither obviously nor directly part of any larger definition, any abstract entity” (217). If there is a generality to be extracted from the passage from Canto 83, it is the refreshment to be gained from refusing to assimilate particulars into a larger

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<sup>19</sup> This Lacanian term is used to describe the subject’s relation to *das Ding*, the Other that can appear good or bad depending on whether one is situated at the correct distance from it: “the intimate exteriority or ‘extimacy,’ that is the Thing” (Lacan 139). In pastoral, nature is revealed to be just such a Thing, “something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me” (Lacan 71). It is the task of pastoral to represent a “middle landscape” between civilization and nature, between sublimation and the unconscious. Negative pastoral is distinguished by its self-consciousness toward Nature as Thing, an unrealizable promise that is the index of repression.

symbolic meaning: “When the mind swings by a grass-blade / an ant’s forefoot shall save you / the clover leaf smells and tastes as its flower” (83/144-146). This is the fundamental gesture of negative pastoral, which here serves to corrode projects of assimilation and domination—in this case both Pound’s own failed Fascist project and the triumph of the conquering American army. In the context of *The Pisan Cantos* the function of “the green world” is quite literally to cut things down to size:

The ant’s a centaur in his dragon world.  
Pull down thy vanity, it is not man  
Made courage, or made order, or made grace,  
    Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down.  
Learn of the green world what can be thy place  
In scaled invention or true artistry,  
Pull down thy vanity,  
                                    Paquin pull down!  
The green casque has outdone your elegance. (81/144-152)

The ambiguity of address here that other critics have noted<sup>20</sup> only serves to emphasize that the critique suggested by the green world is directed toward all grand vanities, be they political, military, or literary in nature. If the jungle of Canto 20 was depicted as a site for the regeneration of power, the ant’s “dragon world” is the site for the preservation of *poiesis*, “true artistry,” and the negation of both overweening “vanity” and merely decorative “elegance.”<sup>21</sup> But it is institutionalized and

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<sup>20</sup> In his introduction to the 2003 edition of *The Pisan Cantos*, Richard Sieburth writes that recent readings have argued “that this jeremiad is in no sense self-reflexive but entirely directed to the ‘other’—the vanity in this case being imputable not to the poet himself but rather to the corrupt social order that has, in violation of Nature, produced the latest war and, more particularly, fostered the American army’s vainglorious imperial ambitions. Although the later interpretation seems to have gained ground, *both* readings remain simultaneously plausible, for it is a particular feature of Pound’s schizopoetics (as Deleuzians might call them) that the positions of self and other, subject and object, remain ever unstable, ever convertible. Even at its most metrically and rhetorically assertive (as in this passage), Pound’s verse is richest when moving within its own space of self-contradiction” (xxxiii-xxxiv, italics in original).

<sup>21</sup> The reference to the dressmaker and designer Jeanne Paquin suggests that Pound’s “green world” echoes the Imagist refusal of “ornament.” More interestingly, it feminizes “vanity” and thus implies the de-feminization or de-genderization of nature, an important contribution to the depiction of nature as a site of alterity.

technological violence that comes in for the most sustained critique in Pound's Pisan pastoral, as represented by one of its final movements:

e poi io dissi alla sorella  
della pastorella dei suini:  
e questi americani?  
    si conducono bene?  
ed ella: poco.  
    Poco, poco.  
ed io: peggio dei tedeschi?  
    ed ella: uguale, thru the barbed wire (PC 84/105-112)

The use of Italian, the language of Pound's pastoral interlocutor, effectively "translates" the voice of the green world, which has nothing good to say about any military occupier and is in fact incapable of distinguishing between them: "And then I said to the sister / of the little swinekeeper: / and these Americans? do they behave well? / and she: not very. / Not very well at all. / And I: worse than the Germans? / and she: the same" (PC 158n105-12). Although presented as degraded and vulnerable shepherds (Meliboeus perhaps to the pastorella's Tityrus), Pound's fellow-prisoners also speak the language of the green world:<sup>22</sup> that is, a language notable for its difference from English and its in-difference to the ideological claims of brute force, recalling Adorno's "model of a nonconceptual, non-rigidified significative language; this would perhaps be the same language that is inscribed in what the sentimental age gave the beautiful if threadbare name, "The Book of Nature." (AT 66-67):

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Sieburth notes the explicitly pastoral uses to which Pound's fellow-prisoners are put: "[W]hereas melting-pot names bear witness to the mongrelized and urbanized (and, for Pound, ultimately Judaized) immigrant history of the United States, the African-American proper names in the poem function as patriotic gestures toward the onomastic memory of an earlier and purer rural America. With their honorific presidential names stenciled in white (*sic*) on their green prison fatigues, the black prisoners therefore represent what is most authentic, most foundational, and, given their African rootedness in the soil, most truly 'natural' and agrarian within the traditional American order: 'I like a certain number of shades in my landscape' (79.31); 'Their green does not swear at the landscape' (78.16); 'Mr. Carver deserves mention for the / cultivation of peanuts' (74.809-10)" (PC xxi). While Sieburth's reading sees a continuation of the recuperative project of idyll, exclusive of "anti-nature," I claim that Pound's version of pastoral here is primarily a negative one, less nostalgic for the imaginary purity of "rural America" than critical of the power wielded by the newborn American military-industrial complex, as well as corrosive of Pound's own imperial-idyllogical tendencies.

magna NOX animae with Barabbas and 2 thieves beside me,  
 the wards like a slave ship,  
 Mr Edwards, Hudson, Henry *comes miseriae*  
 Comites Kernes, Green and Tom Wilson  
 God's messenger Whiteside  
 and the guards op/ of the . . .  
 was lower than that of the prisoners  
 "all them g.d. m.f. generals c.s. all of 'em fascists"  
 "fer a bag o' Dukes"  
 "the things I saye an' dooo"  
 ac ego in harum  
 so lay men in Circe's swine-sty;  
 ivi in harum *ego ac vidi cadaveres animae*  
 "c'mon small fry" sd/ the little coon to the big black;  
 of the slave as seen between decks  
 and all the presidents  
 Washington Adams Monroe Polk Tyler  
 plus Carrol (of Carrolton) Crawford (PC 74/393-410)

Pound's habitual and unreflective racism is tempered somewhat by his ready inclusion of himself as one among others "in Circe's swine-sty"; he is an Odysseus who has lost his gift of *molü* (signifier for the mythic natural world of the earlier Cantos). He keeps the necessary pastoral distance from the other prisoners by rendering their speech in dialect, emphasizing their closeness to nature and indeed their inclusion in nature. The guards and prisoners are both presented as victims of those in power, the "g.d. m.f. generals" who are joined by obscenity to the fascists they claim to oppose. Their situation is one of corrosive irony, their world upside down but also marked by small moments of tenderness ("c'mon small fry"). The passage thus offers us a variant on what Empson calls "The essential trick of the old pastoral, which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, was to make simple people express strong feelings (felt as the most universal subject, something fundamentally true about everybody) in learned and fashionable language (so that you wrote about the best subject in the best way)" (11). Obviously Pound here avoids the convention of elevating the language of the other prisoners; he consistently moves in the other direction, rendering black dialect in a form that is liable to make

modern readers wince. But he does find a “higher” language for the black prisoners not in their speech, but in their last names, whose “common” names (including the pastoral “Green”) in the first part of the passage yield to names that echo those of heroes of the American Revolution. Pound is less interested in the cruel irony of this than he is in legitimizing the black prisoners’ humanity (albeit within his own paternalistic and racist limitations), conflating their fate with his own (the sick wards he and they occupy “like a slave ship”), and imagining, if only for a moment, a kind of democracy of oppression (“the slave as seen between decks”). The prisoners are part of nature just as nature can be constructed as one of them, subject to unnatural “regulations”: “Be welcome, O cricket my grillo, but you must not / sing after taps” (PC 78/107-108).<sup>23</sup> Contrasted with the prisoners’ language is “the army vocabulary [that] contains almost 48 words” (PC 77/206): stripped of the mask of ideology the language of a conquering force is revealed to be, in the strictest sense, mere obscenity.

Pound’s relations to these representatives of “the natural” signify a new, more vulnerable relation to nature, which is no longer a mythical building-block but has a direct impact on the poet’s body and mind. His relation to nature is neither strictly scientific nor wholly mythological, but contains overtones of both in a new context of empathic relation. This makes possible the “saving” that the natural world offers to the poet’s troubled mind: “When the mind swings by a grass-blade / an ant’s forefoot shall save you” (83.144-45). The ant that in the earlier passage loomed mythically as “a centaur in his dragon world” now offers salvation to Pound’s overreaching mind by being sufficient without myth—by drawing Pound’s attention down to the micro level, to “scaled invention.” To see the natural world in detail is to recover one’s senses: “the clover leaf smells and tastes as its flower” (83.146). These lines give us a basic scale

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<sup>23</sup> The friendly intimacy of the Italian “grillo” both domesticates and estranges the cricket, a dialectical move similar to that performed with “Madame La Vespa” (see above).

or continuum for pastoral imagery, with myth-making at one pole and empirical precision at the other. That imagery serves to carve out a space, or a honeycomb of spaces, beyond the reach of history, from which it is possible to reflect on the larger historical project of *The Cantos*. Further, the Whitmanian image of the grass-blade is emblematic of a new openness to experience and suffering (including the suffering of others<sup>24</sup>) that is new to *The Cantos* as a whole. And that image is neither conventional nor decorative, for Pound's new openness is purchased at a high price: his three-weeks exposure to the elements (the "dragon world") in the "death cells" at Pisa. Nature is not given to be beneficent or sacramental here; instead it is an encompassing environment strongly felt within the text itself, an exposure akin to Pound's forced abandonment of his library as a storehouse of literary props. It is less Virgil's Arcadia than it is King Lear's blasted heath, the nature of "unaccommodated man." Of course many critics recognize a kind of "inverted pastoral" in *King Lear*,<sup>25</sup> particularly Act IV when the mad king comes on stage wearing a garland of flowers and proclaiming his vulnerability to the elements in the absence of royal power:

They flattered me like a dog; and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say "ay" and "no" to every thing that I said!—"Ay" and "no" too was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter; when the thunder would not peace at my bidding; there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words: they told me I was every thing; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof. (4.6)

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<sup>24</sup> "J'ai eu pitié des autres / probablement pas assez, and at moments that suited my own convenience" (PC 76/246-48).

<sup>25</sup> See for example Nancy R. Lindheim, "King Lear as Pastoral Tragedy," in *Some Facets of King Lear: Essays in Prismatic Criticism*, edited by Rosalie L. Cole and F.T. Flahiff (University of Toronto Press, 1974): 169-84.

Nature's sovereignty supersedes political sovereignty, imposing its own laws of time (the chronology of black hairs preceding white ones) and space: that is the core of Lear's late-earned wisdom. In other Shakespearean pastorals, including *As You Like It* and *The Tempest*, the ruler returns to power at the end enriched by the experience of nature that has taught him his creaturely limitations. The darkly negative vision of *King Lear* hints that pastoral wisdom comes at a much higher price: Lear has no power to legislate a new morality ("To 't, luxury, pell-mell! for I lack soldiers"), to return to sovereignty, or even to save the life of his daughter—though there is a hint of pastoral compensation in the feather that he believes to be moved by Cordelia's breath in the moment before he dies. This is the version of pastoral that characterizes in *The Pisan Cantos*: the harsh wisdom of a negating nature has come to "a man on whom the sun has gone down" (PC 74/178)—the ideogram Pound chooses to accompany this phrase (*mo*, meaning "not, no") seems to show a human figure being literally crushed by the descending sun. The solar clarity of Pound's fascist vision, which derived so much of its authority from the example of Confucius and Chinese history (the East as dawn, the rising sun) has passed not fully into the night of Hades but into a liminal sunset world. Pound rewrites his earlier vision of a new paradise "Between KUNG and ELEUSIS" (C 52/258)" to fit his predicament "between NEKUIA where are Alcmene and Tyro / and the Charybdis of action / to the solitude of Mt. Taishan" (PC 74/212-214). Pound's marginal Arcadia stands between the descent into the underworld and the Charybdis of historical action, where one must be grateful for the kindnesses of nature ("If the hoar frost grip thy tent / Thou wilt give thanks when night is spent") and fellow "shepherds" such as "Mr Edwards superb green and brown / in ward No 4 a jacent benignity" (PC 74/317-318), who builds Pound a writing-desk in violation of the "regulations" designed to protect "grand larceny" (PC 74/323-327). Pastoral nature is no longer an object for the total social system he wishes to build: it literally





“of sapphire, for this stone giveth sleep”  
 not words whereto to be faithful  
     nor deeds that they be resolute  
         only that bird-hearted equity make timber  
             and lay hold of the earth (74/55-59)

Political rhetoric and resolute deeds (carrying a whiff of the “militarism” criticized in the lines immediately preceding) are supplanted here by “bird-hearted equity.” That phrase seems to conflate nature with democratic ideals, suggesting that *physis* contains or implies its own ethics. Birds are again privileged as messengers of this idea in Canto 82, in which their singing is granted an extraordinary visual representation, an ideogram in its own right:

Be glad poor beaste, love follows after thee  
 Till the cricket hops  
     but does not chirrp in the drill field  
     8th day of September  
     f f  
     d  
         g  
         write the birds in their treble scale  
 Terreus! Terreus! (82/73-81)

Violence shadows these birds in the form of the myth of Procne and Philomena, but they are also messengers of love (“love follows after thee”) and symbols of lyric poetry (the lark, the nightingale). The exclamation of the name of Philomena’s rapist seems to trigger an association with Confucius’ claim (a variation on the last lines of Canto 78) that “there are no righteous wars in ‘The Spring and Autumn’” (82/82-83). The effect is to again underline the opposition of pastoral nature’s “bird-hearted equity” to epic warfare, even as the fragility of pastoral is emphasized by both the proximity of violence and the minimal signification of the birds’ “writing,” which can only remark on their mere being.<sup>28</sup> This is again an attempt to represent Adorno’s “nonconceptual, non-rigidified significative language” of “the

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<sup>28</sup> The birds’ dual signification toward poetry and violence recalls Virgil’s ninth eclogue: “When eagles come, / Tell me what doves can possibly do about it?” (Ferry 71-72)

book of Nature,” a language associated a few lines down with Walt Whitman and pastoral values:

Till forty years since, Reithmuller indignant:  
“Fvy! in Tdaenmarck efen dh’ beasantz gnou him,”  
    meaning Whitman, exotic, still suspect  
    four miles from Camden  
    “O troubled reflection  
    “O Throat, O throbbing heart”  
How drawn, O GEA TERRA,  
    what draws as thou drawest  
    till one sink into thee by an arm’s width  
embracing thee. Drawest,  
    truly thou drawest.  
Wisdom lies next thee,  
    simple, past metaphor.  
Where I lie let the thyme rise  
    and basilicum  
    let the herbs rise in April abundant  
By Ferrara was buried naked, fu Nicolo  
    e di qua di la del Po,  
wind: ‘εμον τον ανδρα (82/93-111)

This elemental vision of nature incorporates the eros of Whitman’s “throbbing heart” and the thanatos of the grave’s embrace, as the partial quotation from “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” recalls “the low and delicious word death.” From the poet’s grave (in an extraordinary conflation of Whitman’s body, the naked body of Niccolò d’Este, and Pound’s) will grow herbs, recalling his earlier example of the smell of mint as a fragment of paradise (74/459). The doubleness of the poet (his compact with Whitman) is mirrored by the double language ascribed the earth, “O GEA TERRA”: both Greek and Latin, a language that nevertheless manages to be “simple, past metaphor.” The repetition of “draw” reinforces the inexorable pull of the earth but also suggests its possibilities as an agent of representation, drawing perhaps more “truly” than human language can. The Greek letters are a quotation from the *Idylls* of Theocritus, translating as “man to my house”: the original speaker of this particular idyll is a maid casting a spell on her straying lover, so that “man,” *andra*, is

refigured as the errant lover of the earth. There is something Circean about such a spell, the suggestion of the return of anti-Nature as nemesis: but the lines that follow, with their variations on an overwhelming “fluid ΧΘΟΝΟΣ” (*CHTHONOS*, with its double meaning of “of the earth” and “of the underworld”), suggest instead that the new relation to nature must necessarily also mean a new relationship with death. In the context of the Theocritus quotation it is a literally pastoral relation, not only in the sense of “et in Arcadia ego est,” but in the sense of self-elegy, as if Lycidas could mourn himself with bitter tears (*dakruon*). The ending lines return us to the birds on a wire:

three solemn half notes  
   their white down chests black-rimmed  
 on the middle wire  
   periplum (82/131-134)

The meaning of the adventure of the periplum has changed: the Odyssean utopic journey toward Dioce has again become a *nostos*, a homecoming—not, however, the return to what one has already known but a paradoxical return to the unknown: to nature as the Other whose protolinguistic desire has a claim on the poet. His task is no longer to act as *Kundiger* or *technites*, the artist-ruler who molds nature; rather than try and direct the sway of *physis*, he will imitate its action in poetry, *poiesis*. The poet’s task is not to labor (“I have not done unnecessary manual labour’ / says the R. C. chaplain’s field book” [74/47-48]) but to sing, as shown in the “libretto” passage from Canto 81:

Hast ‘ou fashioned so airy a mood  
   To draw up leaf from the root?  
 Hast ‘ou found a cloud so light  
   As seemed neither mist nor shade? (PC 81/108-111)

This snatch of song alluding to Ben Jonson’s “Her Triumph” (PC 130n839-40) itself alludes to the famous line near the end of Canto 74, “Hast ‘ou seen the rose in the steel dust / or swansdown ever?” (PC 74/839-840): a figure for nature’s ability to produce

pure form. Here the poet's song is shown to be mimetic of that *physis*, recalling the musician Tian, who "with his hand on the strings of his lute" (C 13/58) represents an alternative to Kung who "wrote on the bo leaves" (C 13/59). In fact, Kung himself is recontextualized in *The Pisan Cantos*, as a paraphrase from the *Mencius* in Canto 83 shows:

And now the ants seem to stagger  
as the dawn sun has trapped their shadows,  
this breath wholly covers the mountains  
it shines and divides  
it nourishes by its rectitude  
does no injury  
overstanding the earth it fills the nine fields  
to heaven (83/87-94)

What is referred to by "this breath" beyond the mist being lifted from the young willows? The passage from the *Mencius* can be paraphrased as follows: "This is the passion nature:—It is exceedingly great, and exceedingly strong. Being nourished by rectitude, and sustaining no injury, it fills up all between heaven and earth.... It is the mate and assistant of righteousness and reason. Without it *man* is in a state of starvation. It is produced by the accumulation of righteous deeds; it is not to be obtained by incidental acts of righteousness. If the mind does not feel complacency in the conduct, *the nature* becomes starved" (italics in original, quoted in Terrell 460-61). The Confucian text thus establishes a direct connection between "righteous deeds" and the energies of *physis*, "the passion nature," suggesting a return to the idyllogy of Pound's Confucianism. But "breath" is a significant choice of words: while referring to the mist, it also suggests the in-spired breath of the poet, who in describing the microworld of the ants saves his sanity and produces the poetry that "shines and divides," discloses and conceals, and above all "nourishes by its rectitude / does no injury." Perhaps this is the first, Hippocratic task of the pastoral poet: to do no harm. As in Canto 13, a pastoral affirmation of song undercuts the celebration of idyllic

values. The climax of *The Pisan Cantos* rewrites the poet's utopian *techne* as pastoral *poiesis*, "Boon companion to equity," shifting the terrain of "deeds" from historical action into the grainfield of the heart:

Boon companion to equity  
it joins with the process  
lacking it, there is inanition

When the equities are gathered together  
as birds alighting  
it springeth up vital

If deeds be not ensheaved and garnered in the heart  
there is inanition

(have I perchance a debt to a man named Clower)

that he eat of the barley corn  
and move with the seed's breath

the sun as a golden eye  
between dark cloud and the mountain

"Non combaattere" said Giovanna  
meaning, as before stated, don't work so hard  
don't

[ideogram *wu*, "not"]  
[ideogram *chu*, "help"]  
[ideogram *ch'ang*, "grow"] (83/95-113)

Righteous "deeds" and "equities" produce the living movement of *physis* while their absence leads to sterile "inanition"; yet the admonition not to "work so hard" suggests a new disconnect between equity and labor. In a letter to William Cookson, Pound wrote, "Ethics begins with agriculture. I.e. enough honesty to let him who plants reap" (Terrell 496); that is, one is entitled to the product of one's labor. But the passage suggests another, more primordial relation to nature that consists of non-interference, letting-be, and "respect for the kind of intelligence that enables grass seed to grow grass; the cherry stone to make cherries" (*Confucius* 193). The idyllology that derives ethics from *techne* is negated or ghosted here by a pastoral *Gelassenheit*,

an ethical stance derived from respect for the nonhuman “intelligence” of *physis*. Although the nature imagery in *The Pisan Cantos* is striking, and striking in a new way beyond any notion of “faux bijoux,” we would be remiss in ignoring the fact that such imagery is actually rather sparse. What is extraordinary in *The Pisan Cantos* is how the poet’s experience of nature-as-negativity transforms not only his relation to natural objects, but to objects in general: the memories, anecdotes, incidents, and quotations that make up the bulk of his poem.

The language of idyllology recurs in many of the later cantos. *Rock-Drill* attempts a reconstruction of Confucian values that begins with an affirmation of *techne* as that which confirms the sovereignty of the self: “plus always Τεχνη / and from Τεχνη back to σεαυτον [oneself]” (C 85/566). *Thrones* is the last major bid of *The Cantos* to become a “school-book for princes” and centers on a return to Pound’s obsession with establishing the order of a paternalistic state founded upon an authentic currency, itself supported by agrarian values. Here we find again the image of the ruler imitating the peasant, so that cultivation of the land guarantees political legitimacy as it once guaranteed the legitimacy of the Monte dei Paschi bank: “From of old the sovereign likes plowing / & the Empress tends trees with reverence; / Nor shrink from the heat of labour” (C 99/729), and, “From ploughing of fields is justice” C 100/735). Such sentiments have led commentators to speak in deprecating terms reminiscent of Lawrence Rainey’s: Leon Surette writes, “It is easy to mock the massive labour of the later cantos bringing forth the mouse of a pastoral kingdom” (235). In fact, Pound’s utopia always had idyllic underpinnings. But the terms of the pastoral break from idyllology that occurs in *The Pisan Cantos*, and the affirmation of a value that does not derive from labor, are not so easily effaced. A notable passage in *Rock-Drill* contrasts Pound’s heroic estimation of the importance of human will (“directio voluntatis”) with nature as the more primordial “causa motuum,” an unhurried yet



for Pound's understanding of nature as being marked by "signatures" independent not only of human action, but of human language: natural object as ideogram (a notion recalling Pound's dictum, "the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol" [LE 5, italics in original]). "Pound, following Heydon, distinguishes 'monumenta' (plastic arts), 'documenta' (verbal arts), and 'phenomena' (art of nature. The oak endlessly bears a precise pattern of the oak leaf, directed by an intelligence in nature, without the aid of man" (Terrell 495). Nature writes its difference ("oak leaf never plane leaf") without human assistance; Heydon as "Seer of pretty visions" registers that difference, who in the Ur-Canto is granted a vision of Nature personified:

Thus Heydon, in a trance, at Bulverton,  
Had such a sight:  
Decked all in green, with sleeves of yellow silk  
Slit to the elbow, slashed with various purples.  
Her eyes were green as glass, her foot was leaf-like.  
She was adorned with choicest emeralds,  
And promised him the way of holy wisdom.  
"Pretty green bank," began the half-lost poem. (*Personae* 241)

This green lady herself (a spirit named Euterpe,<sup>29</sup> perhaps identical to the muse of lyric poetry and consonant with the other goddess figures that populate *The Cantos*) is "the half-lost poem" of nature, implicitly contrasted a few lines down with an account of the "Wordsworthian, false-pastoral manner" in which the figures of Lorenzo and Ficino "heard deep platitudes about contentment / From some old codger with an endless beard" (241). The Romantic pastoral of "the simple-lifers" holds no interest for Pound; the old codger's platitudes cannot have the appeal of the enigmatic language of "'Pretty green bank,' began the half-lost poem." While "prettiness" as an aesthetic response to nature is criticized as inadequate for its "half-transparent forms, lacking the vigor of gods," there is also a sense in which "plaintive charm" must be

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<sup>29</sup> As identified by Walter Baumann in his essay "Secretary of Nature, J. Heydon" in *New Approaches to Ezra Pound*, ed. Eva Hesse (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969): 309.

given its due. (In Canto 91 there is the line, “And there be who say there is no road to felicity,” a line which Walter Baumann has shown is adapted from John Heydon’s writings: “And to say there is no such thing as *Pulchitruide*, and some say, there is no way to felicity” [315]). The vulnerability of prettiness, of pleasure in nature, is the risk undertaken by “a tradition / that was not mere epistemology.” The language of nature represented in Canto 87 by the figure of Heydon is not that of “documenta” or “verbal tradition”; as an aspect of a phenomenological pastoral it offers both pleasure and “holy wisdom.” As a language its functioning is described by another allusion to Heydon at the opening of Canto 90: “From the colour the nature / & by the nature the sign!” (C 90/625). What appears—phenomena—derives from a thing’s nature, a nature that is intelligible not as “documenta” but as a “sign” made available by the perceiver’s affection: “What thou lovest well remains, / the rest is dross.... First came the seen, then thus the palpable / Elysium, though it were in the halls of hell” (PC 81/134-141). Mere perception of the green world, “though it were in the halls of hell,” not mere epistemology, is required to discover the palpable that has been deposited, so to speak, in the “pretty green bank.” That is, “out of all this beauty something must come” (84/71).

Pastoral beauty is prior to the utopia in the mind, antipathetic to the “furious... perception” that impelled Pound’s totalitarian idylology. In Canto 90 Pound seems to refer to himself in lines that contain a dual reference to Evita Perón and Hitler’s mistress Eva Braun: “Evita, beer-halls, semina motuum, / to parched grass, now is rain / not arrogant from habit, / but furious from perception” (C 90/626); while Canto 104 uses almost identical language to describe Hitler himself: “Adolf furious from perception” (C 104/761). This fury, having cast Pound down to the “Erebus” of St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, requires his rescue at the hands of various benevolent feminine figures (“Sibylla,” “Isis,” “Kuanon”), who lift him up (“m’ elevasti”) as Dante was

elevated by Beatrice in the *Paradiso*. There is some doubt as to whether Pound ever truly renounces the fury of his perceptions (Terrell sees the fury of “Adolf” as directed at “bankers and usurocrats,” though he also takes pains to refer to Pound’s 1934 description of Hitler as “an, almost, pathetic hysteric” [678]); but Canto 90 does end with an affirmation of the reciprocity between perception and affection for nature:

Trees die & the dream remains  
Not love but that love flows from it  
ex animo  
& cannot ergo delight in itself  
but only in the love flowing from it.  
UBI AMOR IBI OCULUS EST. (C 90/629)

The death of actual trees does not destroy the pastoral dream, but its persistence differs from the archetypal city of Dioce “now in the mind indestructible” (PC 74/199). Pound’s pastoral is a function produced by a kind of dialectical wavering:

I don’t know how humanity stands it  
with a painted paradise at the end of it  
without a painted paradise at the end of it  
the dwarf morning-glory twines around the grass blade  
magna NOX animae with Barabbas and 2 thieves beside me. (PC  
74/389-393)

Reminiscent of Beckett’s “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” and King Lear’s confrontation with the harsh reality of “unaccommodated man,” this passage represents the mutation of Pound’s high modernist utopian ambitions into something more partial, fragmented, hesitant—and yet affirming the need for some sort of “paradise” that is at once “painted” and “n’est pas artificiel.” Though not without grandiloquence (as the identification with Christ indicates), Pound’s desperation is clear, marked by the Latin phrase “magna NOX animae”: “great NIGHT of the soul.” Yet the phrase is one letter away from a figure for the potential of the body to realize spirit, and an affirmation of nature as the foundation for that spirit: “magna NUX animae” or “great NUT of the

soul.”<sup>30</sup> The doubling here serves as a kind of rhyme, framing the vision of pastoral potential within the profound experience of negativity that makes it necessary if humanity is to “stand it.” Such is the disquieting effect of negative pastoral, proposing a paradise immediately undermined by its own artificiality, yet necessary to the survival of the utopian imagination that Pound ultimately affirms, even as he regrets his own attempts to make it concrete:

I have tried to write Paradise

Do not move  
Let the wind speak  
that is paradise.

Let the gods forgive what I  
have made  
Let those I love try to forgive  
what I have made. (C 117/822)

The attempt to “write Paradise” is sublated by *Gelassenheit*: the *poiesis* that does not impose itself on nature but gives it a voice: “Let the wind speak / that is paradise.” At the end of his lifework, Pound has discovered that what he has “made” through *techné* stands outside the two perdurable realms of the sacred he has delineated in his poem: that of “the gods” and that of “those I love.” The attempt to bring the mythic nature of the realm of the gods into history, “to hitch sensibility to efficiency” (C 113/808) has ended in disaster and lamentation: “And who no longer make gods out of beauty / Θρηνος this is a dying” (C 113/806). Instead the realm of gods has been put into the same anguished suspension as the painted paradise: “The Gods have not returned. ‘They have never left us.’ / They have not returned” (C 113/807). Pastoral persists in its weak, “delicate” form as a beauty “lacking the vigor

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<sup>30</sup> Earlier editions of *The Cantos* actually spelled the word as “NUX,” as indicated by Terrell, p. 376. The doubleness of the Latin phrase is confirmed by lines from the *Drafts & Fragments*: “That the body is inside the soul— / the lifting and folding brightness / the darkness shattered, / the fragment” (C 113/808-809).



pastoral, whose hybridity (as demonstrated by the persistent subgenre of pastoral elegy) locates Arcadia not just between civilization and nature, but between history and the individual. After World War II, the social autobiography of the poetry of Louis Zukofsky, Ronald Johnson, and James Schuyler becomes the signature terrain of a pastoral that undermines power and pieties alike, in the name of preserving the possibility of utopian light.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Ecolage and Ambience in the Poetry of Louis Zukofsky**

#### ***1. Our Beards' Familiars: Eliot and Pound***

“The artist is one of the few producers. He, the farmer and the artisan create wealth; the rest shift and consume it” (“The Renaissance,” LE 222). This statement of Ezra Pound’s summarizes the pastoral ideology that guides the utopian poetics of *The Cantos*, which seek to superimpose the ethos of artist-as-producer over the image of the maximum leader, a direct result of Pound’s starry-eyed characterization of Mussolini as “*artifex*” (J/M 34). Pound’s moral blindness regarding Mussolini and Italian Fascism comes at least in part as the result of his undialectical thinking, which posits an approach to nature as foundation of productive value against an unnatural, shifting and consuming usury. Dialectic was thrust upon Pound by his imprisonment in Pisa, where he discovered a new “saving” relation to nature that upset the dichotomy of *techne* versus usury. In subsequent Cantos his efforts to restabilize that crucial dichotomy are never entirely successful, leaving him in the *Drafts and Fragments* to lament that “I cannot make it cohere.” But as I have shown, what Pound cannot incorporate into his vision of paradise is the persistent negativity of his fragmentary pastoral: a vision of nature as a constellation of particulars that resist reincorporation into a universal ideology of “Nature.” “Let the wind speak / That is paradise.” At the end of utopia comes the abdication of the *Kundiger*, the artist as totalizing subject. The wind is the voice of the objective: inscribing that voice in Pound’s poem means its retracing, its mimesis. Pound’s pastoral ends by erring on the side of speechless expression: music takes precedence over speech if by speech we mean the communicativity of language, language as the zone of the conceptual. It has all the appearance of a dead end for poetry, especially a utopian poetry, and many

have taken it as such. Yet the late work of Pound's disciple Louis Zukofsky takes "upper limit music" as its starting point, and shows the way forward into a pastoral of the signifier, a constructivist ecolage whose influence on late modernist and postmodern pastoral poetics continues to grow.

The young Zukofsky, operating in the shadow of *il miglior fabbro* and a modernism that tended toward Fascism and anti-Semitism, was bound from the beginning to try and turn his belatedness and otherness into advantages by writing in the spirit of bricolage. His first major work, *Poem Beginning "The,"* seeks to dismantle and repurpose the already formidable monolith of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, focusing immediately by its title on the word "the" as an emblem of strategy, mastery, and domination, while foreshadowing Zukofsky's rejection of the modernist urge toward myth in his 1946 essay "Poetry/*For My Son When He Can Read*": "The poet wonders why so many today have raised up the word 'myth,' finding the lack of so-called 'myths' in our time a crisis the poet must overcome or die from, as it were, having become too radioactive, when instead a case can be made out for the poet giving some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a*: both of which are weighted with as much epos and historical destiny as one man can perhaps resolve" (Prep+ 10). This care for articles, for the particles of language that would seem to bear the least importance and significance, forecasts Zukofsky's entire career as one of care for the minute and abject, within language and without. Zukofsky saw "*The*" as a reply to *The Waste Land* that rejected both its conclusions and its methods, as shown in a paragraph from a letter written to Pound on December 12, 1930:

"The" was a directly reply to The Waste Land—meant to avoid T.S.E's technique, line etc (tho I see how much more lucid it is than my own) occasional slickness, but intended to tell him why, spiritually speaking, a wimpus was still possible and might even bear fruit of another

generation. Didn't like his Wagnerian leit motives, so I ended, or so I think, by doing something more discursive, more a matter of sequential statement—Pope maybe in modern dress, but the positive getting the better of the satire in opening First Movement, parts of two and most of 5 and 6. But on the whole, left merely with the promise of the last lines trans from Yehoash—"shall be." (P/Z 78-79)

Associating Eliot's mode of collage with Wagner suggests that Zukofsky saw Eliot's poem as an attempt at the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a "total artwork" that threatened to blot out the horizon of modern poetry, so that an act of clearing such as Zukofsky's for a new "wimpus" was necessary, even at the cost of a certain "lucidity." Zukofsky's attempt to associate "*The*" with Alexander Pope (presumably a satire like *The Dunciad* foremost in his mind) would seem to base the "promise" of the new poem on a return to orderly sequence, to the accumulation of discrete "heroic couplets" into a "sequential statement" if not a full-blown hypotaxis. Yet the Yeohashian promise is one of multiplicity, especially given that Zukofsky replaces Yeohash's "I" with "we" at the end of *Poem Beginning "The"*: "327 How wide our arms are, / 328 How strong, / 329 A myriad years we have been, / 330 Myriad upon myriad shall be" (CSP 20). Zukofsky's poem is intended both formally and in terms of content to resist the force of closure that emanates from Eliot's *Gesamtgedicht*, to "bear fruit of another generation" and, as the Biblical echo in "Myriad upon myriad" suggests, for generations yet to come.<sup>1</sup> Zukofsky's invocation of Pope may have less to do with the Augustan authority and forms generally associated with that poet than with his sense of Pope as an outsider: the child of a Catholic family struggling for his place in the Protestant literary culture of eighteenth-century England. Such would

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 15.5, KJV: "And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be."

have been a point of empathy for the young Jewish poet alienated both from his own religion and the Christianity in which the literary tradition he loved is so firmly embedded.

Zukofsky did not therefore so much “avoid T.S.E’s technique” as approach it from another perspective: that of the Other whose can never quite “own” the materials of literary tradition that English poets might take for granted, but who also rejects the project of appropriation and assimilation that Eliot as Anglophilic American was embarked upon. The word “wimpus” may be a clue here: though the word does not appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary* it resembles “wimple,” which can mean “A fold or wrinkle; a turn, winding, or twist: a ripple or rippling in a stream” and “A crafty turn or twist; a wile.” The notion of twisting or folding seems to describe Zukofsky’s approach to Eliot’s form, which wryly intensifies *The Waste Land*’s innovations: numbering every line where Eliot only numbered every tenth line; dividing “*The*” into six “Movements” where Eliot has five sections; and placing the notes that Eliot put at the end of his poem at the beginning of his own in the form of a dedication “to Anyone and Anything I have unjustifiably forgotten” (CSP 8). But Zukofsky’s ripple in Eliot’s stream goes deeper. Eliot’s “Notes on ‘The Waste Land’” carefully attribute the poem’s sources to canonical texts (chiefly Dante and Renaissance poet-playwrights like Shakespeare and Webster), marking them not only as the “fragments of reality” required by collage but as components of a new whole presided over by the poet’s unifying sensibility.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Zukofsky’s dedication to *Poem Beginning “The”* ranges widely in reference, doing homage to his Modernist

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Eliot’s famous claim regarding dissociation of sensibility in “The Metaphysical Poets”: “A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.” *Selected Prose*, p. 64.

aunts and uncles (Pound, Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Marianne Moore, etc.) while also citing canonical texts (Chaucer, Sophocles, the Bible), composers (Bach, Beethoven), political figures (Mussolini), and a multitude of abstractions (“Broadway,” “The French Language,” “The King’s English,” “Modern Advertising,” “The Yellow Menace”), all in decidedly tongue-in-cheek fashion.

Crammed as it is with references not just to the literary canon but to a broad array of representatives of the high and low cultures of modernity, Zukofsky’s parodic dedication for a poem published only four years after Eliot’s masterpiece demonstrates his belief that he must resort to the tactic of bricolage in the face of Modernist strategies of canon-assimilation that threaten to exclude him. His attitude toward collage and citation is already markedly different from that of his mentor-to-be, Ezra Pound, whose saw quotation as means for the poet to establish “a strategic position” (SP 26) within the literary canon, and registers a more subtle difference from Eliot’s 1930 claim that “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion” (quoted in Ma 131-32). Zukofsky’s poem effectively dialecticizes Eliot’s dichotomies “immature” and “mature,” “bad” and “good,” “a whole of feeling” and “something which has no cohesion.” The structure of “*The*” puts its fragments into ironic tension with each other rather than accruing authority from their accumulation, a tactic of bricolage that he will also adopt in building his “poem of a life,” “*A*,” intended to make the earlier poem’s “promise good” (P/Z 79).

In “*A*”-4, written just two years after “*The*” was published in *The Exile*, Zukofsky imagines the querulous voice of his elders:

Wherever we put our hats is our home  
Our aged heads are our homes,



I watch the rings spread and travel  
Shimaunu-San, Samurai,  
When will you come home? –  
Shimaunu-San, my clear star. (A-4 13)

Translated into English via Yiddish, the Japanese poem inevitably recalls the translations of Asian poetry that appeared in Pound's *Cathay*. "Jargon" thus refers not so much to Yiddish as it does to the capacity of a vernacular language for the polyphonic appropriation of other languages: it represents polyphony itself, which can never itself be a pure, monologic "Speech." "Jargon" represents nothing less than a language's capacity for collage, its ability to incorporate foreign terms and dialects. As such it has no territory to call its own, but acts like a force field in which heterogenous elements can be suspended. Though jargon is a name for language's capacity for dialogism, it can be used strategically or monologically by a poet like Eliot in order to build a new edifice, provided that the foreignness of what it incorporates is marked as such, separate from the "Speech" he attempts to synthesize from it. Jargon for the modernists functions like a kind of passport control, as Ming-Qian Ma observes:

The image for quotations thus employed in the modernist praxis becomes, rather fittingly, that of an immigrant: a permanent resident with an alien registration number, documented by, as the case may be, quotation marks, italics, duplications of foreign words, or various forms of notes and indexes. For the modernists, to maintain such a distinction or boundary is a psychological imperative, for their use of quotations, as Michael André Bernstein contends, "does not so much draw upon a canonic tradition as seek to establish one" ("Bringing" 178), one that is based on what Pound believes to be "a return to origins ... a return to nature and reason" (*Literary Essays* 92). This return, however coherent in content, also needs a visual or formal manifestation to buttress its sense of literalness or actuality. (134)

For Eliot, the “fragments I have shored against my ruins” (46.431) are needed to “at least put my lands in order” (46.426); whatever their current condition, he knows he has a territory, “lands” whose order can at least potentially be established by drawing boundaries between the foreign and “nature and reason.” As the son of Yiddish-speaking immigrants, Zukofsky can only feel himself excluded by such boundaries: he has a direct interest in preserving the fluidity of an uncontrolled, undomesticated jargon for the sake of the tactical room to maneuver it provides between the crushing and incommensurable imperatives of Jewish identity and modernist writing. Jargon is “minor literature” in the sense used by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.<sup>4</sup> By contrast Zukofsky sees Solomon Bloomgarden, aka Yehoash, as the “major” inhabitant of a marginal language. Yehoash’s translations of Japanese and Arabic poems into Yiddish are most probably intended to raise Yiddish to the dignity of an international literary language, a “Speech.” By embedding his translation of Yehoash’s translation into “A,” Zukofsky turns the Japanese poem into another fragment of his jargon, music of the “ostracized” that grates on the ears of the “Religious, snarling monsters” jealous of their territory and fearful of lost coherence.

In *Poem Beginning “The,”* Zukofsky neither denies his Jewishness nor seeks to strategically establish a Jewish territory for himself; the figure of Yehoash appears in the poem as Zukofsky’s doppelganger, the poet of strategy he might have been. Instead, his ambivalence produces a self-consciously shrewd and tactical attitude toward both Jewishness and the “jargon” of both Yiddish and Modernism that comprise the tools not his own that Zukofsky has to work with:

251 Assimilation is not hard  
252 And once the Faith’s askew

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<sup>4</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, translated by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

253 I might as well look Shagetz just as much  
       as Jew.  
 254 I'll read their Donne as mine  
 255 And leopard in their spots  
 256 I'll do what says their Coleridge,  
 257 Twist red hot poker into knots.  
 258 The villainy they teach me I will execute  
 259 And it shall go hard with them,  
 260 For I'll better the instruction,  
 261 Having learned, so to speak, in their  
       colleges.  
 262 It is engendered in the eyes  
 263 With gazing fed, and fancy dies  
 264 In the cradle where it lies  
 265 In the cradle where it lies  
 266 I, Senora, am the Son of the Respected  
       Rabbi,  
 267 Israel of Saragossa,  
 268 Not that the Rabbis give a damn,  
 269 Keine Kadish wird man sagen. (CSP 17-18)

The poet impersonates Shylock at an equivocal moment, in which the villain of *The Merchant of Venice* affirms his fundamental kinship with Christians (“Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?” [3.1]) while swearing revenge on those same Christians: “And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villany you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction” (3.1). As with Shylock, Zukofsky’s promised “assimilation” is deliberately ironic and incomplete. The Yiddish word “Shagetz” resonates as an emblem of the very vernacular Jewishness it purports to reject, while the (incomplete) translation and paraphrase of two Heinrich Heine poems in lines 266-267 and 269 simultaneously presents and

rejects the more formal and religious role Zukofsky might be expected to assume: “Keine Kadish wird man sagen,” “No Kaddish will be said.” The poem from which this line is drawn, “Gedächtnisfeier” or “Celebration of Memory,” combines Christian and Jewish ritual (“Keine Messe wird man singen, / keinen Kadosch wird man sagen”) for a synthetic act of self-lamentation; Zukofsky’s use of Heine, especially with the cynical “268 Not that the Rabbis give a damn” inserted between the two poems, prevents the cultural gap from closing.

“Assimilation” may not be hard, but it is not Zukofsky’s true path. Lines 262-265 of “*The*” are adapted from the song in *The Merchant of Venice* at 3.2 where

Bassanio is choosing one of Portia’s caskets:

Tell me where is Fancy bred,  
Or in the heart, or in the head?  
How begot, how nourishèd?  
Reply, reply.

It is engender’d in the eyes;  
With gazing fed; and Fancy dies  
In the cradle where it lies. (3.2)

The original song answers its own question about the origins of “Fancy”; Zukofsky’s version only gives us the answer, leaving the question implicit. In the context of the passage, “assimilation” thus becomes the equivalent to or substitute for fancy, the “It” that “is engendered in the eyes / 263 With gazing fed, and fancy dies / 264 In the cradle where it lies / 265 In the cradle where it lies.” The repetition suggests the fragility of assimilation/fancy, which “dies / In the cradle where it lies”—the “cradle” perhaps being the head, mind, or skull from which the eyes gaze. At the same time, Zukofsky’s lifelong obsession with seeing and sight, his conflation of “I” and “eye,” and his association of vision with love, suggests that whatever is engendered in the eyes, whether called “fancy” or “assimilation,” might be something precious. Fancy, we may recall, is distinguished from the “Imagination” by Coleridge (invoked at line

256); while Imagination is positive and synthetic, that which “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create,” Fancy is negative and analytic: it “has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word Choice. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association” (Shedd 364). As Zukofsky uses the term, then, “assimilation” is a possible category of relationship between himself and the objects of the dominant (Christian, literary) culture that he has received “ready made.” Zukofsky has indeed gazed and gazed upon these objects, but to “read their Donne as mine” is not to *own* Donne; the word “read” here rather recalls the scholarly convention of substituting one term for another: *for x, read y*. Zukofsky the reader, the Jewish scholar who is not a scholar of Judaism, remains suspended in that convention, unable to claim Donne as a forebear and contemporary the way Eliot does in his essay, “Metaphysical Poets.” If we read “assimilation” as Coleridge’s “mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by... Choice” then Eliot might indeed appear as a poet of assimilation, willfully rearranging the fragments of literary tradition to best suit him. Zukofsky, however, is more likely to identify with these fragments *as* fragments, so changeable and rearrangeable as to be able to “leopard in their spots”: his deployment of the artifacts of Christian literary culture must somewhat resemble the practice of Marcel Duchamp, whose own “ready-mades” both gave him a place in the art world and threatened to implode it altogether.

For Zukofsky, *The Waste Land* stands as an emblem of the modernism that attracts him but which he cannot help resisting and being Other to. He rejects the strategic appropriation of cultural capital performed by a poem like *The Waste Land*: a

kind of sterile usury or primitive accumulation that Zukofsky likens to the incest of Oedipus:

4 A boy's best friend is his mother,  
5 It's your mother all the time.  
6 Residue of Oedipus-faced wrecks  
7 Creating out of the dead,—  
.....  
10 Books from the stony heart, flames rapping  
the stone,  
11 Residue of self-exiled men  
12 By the Tyrrhenian.<sup>5</sup> (CSP 9)

Eliot appears to Zukofsky as the paradigmatic cultural capitalist, appropriating the accumulated labor of the literary tradition to form the basis of his own edifice, the reciprocal “monument” alluded to in Eliot’s essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”<sup>6</sup> It is Eliot’s macabre desire to see the “That corpse you planted last year in your garden” sprout (TWL 31.71). Zukofsky by contrast is enraged by this sort of “Creating out of the dead”: “108 Damn it! they have made capital of his flesh / and bone / 109 What, in revenge, can dead flesh and bone / make capital?” (CSP 12-13). The implicit answer comes in the form of another quotation from Yehoash, another translation of a translation, as indicated by Zukofsky’s dedication: “Yehoash—110-129” (CSP 8). The lines imagine the revival of a “Bedouin” from a death-like state, but more significant is the fact of jargon, of Zukofsky’s incorporation of an Arabic poem via the Yiddish of Yehoash. The double foreignness dialectically cancels itself:

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<sup>5</sup> “Tyrrhenian” refers to Aldous Huxley’s 1925 novel *Those Barren Leaves*, a satire on intellectual and artistic pretensions set in a villa by the Tyrrhenian Sea; its title is almost parodically evocative of *The Waste Land*. Jeffrey Twichell-Waas, *Z-site: A Companion to the Works of Louis Zukofsky* (<http://www.ofscollege.edu.sg/z-site/notes-to-poetry/Poem-beginning-The.php>), accessed 11/10/05.

<sup>6</sup> “The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.” In *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, edited by Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1975): 38-39. See also Ming-Qian Ma’s claim that Eliot’s “diachronic trajectory opens, by its all-embracing ‘oneness,’ a synchronic field in which a new synthesis takes place” (131).

the quotation is rendered neither “immigrant” nor “native,” serving not to “make capital” but only to sustain the movement of the Movement, to create a marginal space for the living. The narrow accommodation Zukofsky makes for himself is further suggested by self-consciousness about his physical thinness: “138 Your weight less than one hundred / twenty-five pounds, / 139 One half of a disabled veteran, and / probably / 140 the whole of an unknown soldier” (CSP 13-14). Likening himself to “the whole of an unknown soldier” suggests an uneasy identification with *The Waste Land*’s blooming corpse; at the same time he is emphatically not dead (as the sexual play of “Peter Out” indicates), so that he is marked as both inheritor and denizen of the postwar waste land that is for Eliot a crisis to be overcome.

Like the modernist master of an earlier generation, the Henry James who toured the Lower East Side in the year of Zukofsky’s birth, Eliot is fascinated and appalled by the “waste” space he discovers presided over by “Burbank with a Baedeker, Bleistein with a Cigar,” with the Other at its most animalistic and horrifying at its bottom: “The rats are underneath the piles. / The jew is underneath the lot” (\_\_\_). Zukofsky is part of that waste, that fundament. His solution can only be, like Whitman, to claim himself to be a part of “this compost” and discover the ecologic possibilities of a language in decay: “318 By the wrack we shall sing our Sun-song” (CSP 20). The multiplication imagined at the close of “*The*” with its repeated claim, “A myriad years we have been, / Myriad upon myriad shall be” does not constitute an imperial “us” so much as sheer multiplicity and difference. While these myriads inevitably recall the “Stars of Deuteronomy” that will surround the Jewish elders of “A”-4, the speaker’s play on “O my son Sun, my son, my son Sun!” (19) suggests a desire to represent this multiplicity not as the nation of Israel but as diverse individual Sun/sons, “Comrade” to “you great Sun,” emblematic of nature as source of life.

Finally they allude to an ancient Egyptian poem—for Zukofsky, the ancientness of poetry itself—as this paragraph from his 1950 essay, “A Statement for Poetry” shows:

The oldest recorded poems go back to the Egyptian *Chapters of Coming Forth by Day*, some of whose hieroglyphs were old by 3000 B.C. The human tradition that survives the esoteric significance of these poems remains, as in these lines praising the sun:

Millions of years have passed, we cannot count their number,  
Millions of years shall come. You are above the years.

It is quite safe to say that the *means* and *objects* of poetry (cf. Aristotle’s *Poetics*) have been constant, that is, recognizably human, since ca. 3000 B.C. (P+ 20)

The “constant, that is, recognizably human” quality that Zukofsky wants to ascribe to poetry’s “*means* and *objects*” transforms multiplicity itself into a universal that goes beyond questions of territoriality or tribe. A year later in “The Effacement of Philosophy,” Zukofsky commented thusly on the Spinoza-inflected “naturalism or intelligent materialism” of George Santayana’s book *Dominations and Powers*: “As he says, his book is a departure from Plato and Aristotle, who spoke for an ancient city in its decline; they hardly considered non-territorial powers, such as universal religions, nor the relation of the state to the non-political impulses of human nature” (P+ 54). He goes on to quote Santayana: “Victory or prosperity for one’s own people or one’s own civilization will no longer seem an ultimate or unqualified good ... only manifesting, in one arbitrary form, the universal impulse in matter towards all sorts of harmonies and perfections” (54). Zukofsky wants poetry to be such a “non-territorial power,” expressing not a particular civilization’s *paideuma* but “the universal impulse in

matter.” He makes a claim for the “universal” that is uncoupled from any one civilization or creed’s totalizing impulse to occupy the space of the universal—instead, it is an “impulse in matter”—that is, nature—toward a multiplicity of “harmonies and perfections.” At the same time this attachment to nature means that Zukofsky cannot separate himself from nature-as-object, the abject corpse-matter of Eliot’s *Waste Land* or the pestilential swamps of Pound’s *Cantos*.

Zukofsky’s reluctant self-identification as Other allies him with the nature or matter that the Western tradition of “Plato and Aristotle, who spoke for an ancient city in decline” seeks to control, process, manage, or territorialize. He seeks an alternative to Pound’s approach of the 1920s and 30s, which is to alternately demonize nature (as feminine-Jewish-unclean Other) and mythologize it (as the source of Pound’s Odyssean-Confucian-agrarian ethical order). At the same time his program for “Objectivist” writing extends his rejection of Eliotic “symbolist” writing, as Charles Altieri has written:

[Symbolist strategies] stress in various ways the mind’s powers to interpret concrete events or to use the event to inquire into the nature or grounds of interpretive energies, while objectivist strategies aim to “compose” a distinct perceptual field which brings “the rays from an object to a focus.” Where objectivist poets seek an artifact presenting the modality of things seen or felt as immediate structure of relations, symbolist poets typically strive to see beyond the seeing by rendering in their work a process of meditating upon what the immediate relations in perception effect. (“The Objectivist Tradition,” *The Objectivist Nexus* 26)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Altieri later reformulates this opposition in a way that draws an explicit connection between immanence and nature, writing that in Objectivist practice “poetic creation is conceived more as the

The emphasis is on direct contact with perception rather than reflective interpretation, purportedly bringing Objectivist writing closer to contact with “things seen or felt.” This desire to present an “immediate structure of relations” is the impulse Zukofsky characterizes as “sincerity” in his essay for the 1931 “Objectivists” issue of *Poetry*, “Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff”:

In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody of form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody. Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness. Parallels sought for in the other arts call up the perfect line of occasional drawing, the clear beginnings of sculpture not proceeded with. (P+ 194)

There is an unfinished quality suggested for Objectivist writing in Zukofsky’s comparisons with other arts, a desire that “clear beginnings” not be swallowed up by any totalizing “mirage.” As the next paragraph suggests, the Objectivist poem is meant to be an object as filled with mute significance, as finished yet unfinishable as a tree or flower:

Presented with sincerity, the mind even tends to supply, in further suggestion which does not attain rested totality, the totality not always found in sincerity and necessary only for perfect rest, complete

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discovery of numinous relationships within nature than as the creation of containing and structuring forms.” From *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry During the Sixties* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1979): 16.

appreciation. This rested totality may be called objectification—the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object. That is: distinct from print which records action and existence and incites the mind to further suggestion, there exists, tho it may not be harbored as solidity in the crook of an elbow, writing (audibility in two-dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such. (194)

Zukofsky's "rested totality" is not a philosophical totality: it is a kind of cognitive completeness, "a structure. . . to which the mind does not wish to add; nor does it, any more than when it contemplates a definite object by itself. The mind may conceivably prefer one object to another.... But this is a matter of preference rather than the invalidation of the object not preferred" (195-6). To that Zukofsky added his well-known footnote: "It is assumed that epistemological problems do not affect existence, that a personal structure of relations might be a definite object, or *vice versa*" (196, italics original). He therefore claims a phenomenological status for the Objectivist poem that is exactly concurrent with its status as aesthetic object, the contemplation of which results in "perfect rest, complete appreciation" rather than "incit[ing] the mind to further suggestion"—implying a refusal of both the mode of reflection attributed to symbolist writing (which must always come wrapped in ideology) and the conceptual apprehension or seizure of the object. A kind of paraphrase of these ideas can be found in this passage from the twenty-eighth of Zukofsky's *29 Songs*:

He was in his own time, his fears too much aroused and prolonged,  
teased by repeated disappointments in the attainment of his object. If  
his notes could not extricate themselves from this complicated mass,  
they would be to his tactility like meeting at a point without further

coincidence or intersection. If they did extricate themselves, they would, moving towards a definite shape, become capable of being apprehended, themselves their own existence in the plain of surrounding existence, tactility of materials become tangible. Lao-tse was working a Chinese puzzle consisting of a square cardboard cut by straight incisions into five triangles, a square and a lozenge—combining them into a variety of figures. It was a relief from ethics, an approach to the blue huckleberry. (CSP 63)

In this parable of Objectivist writing from Zukofsky's *Thanks to the Dictionary* project,<sup>8</sup> the "he" (the first sentence of 28 reads, "'Specifically, a writer of music'" [61], which is probably an allusion to King David, the writer of the Psalms) struggles to achieve an art whose elements—"notes," "materials"—would "extricate themselves from this complicated mass" of the world and take on "their own existence in the plain of surrounding existence." Following this statement comes a shift that seems at least in part a parody of Pound's usage of Chinese sages in *The Cantos*, in which Lao-tse is depicted as a sort of bricoleur, producing "a variety of figures" from a limited selection of geometrical figures. Such recombination is "a relief from ethics, an approach to the blue huckleberry"—a path leading away from the ethical order that both Lao-tse and Pound are used to constructing toward the pure apprehension and appreciation of a natural object (reminiscent of Tian the musician's attitude in Canto 13). It is also, with its emphasis on the mathematical and geometric, an emphatically un-mythic path, in which the different shapes like the musician's "notes" can be

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<sup>8</sup> "About 10,000 words long, *Thanks to the Dictionary* retells the story of David, the second king of Israel, 1055-105 B.C.E., as recounted in the Bible (I and II Samuel—I Kings)... Each of the twenty-nine sections draws much of its vocabulary from a page from one of two dictionaries, a 1930 *Funk and Wagnalls Practical Standard Practical Dictionary*, and a 1917 *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. The page determining the vocabulary of each episode was as a rule established—as the twenty-fifth section tells us—by a throw of dice." Peter Quartermain, "Writing and Authority in Zukofsky's *Thanks to the Dictionary*" in *Upper Limit Music*, p. 160.

combined “into a variety of figures” without sacrificing their identity: “the detail, not mirage, of seeing.” Each component—note, shape, or word—is permitted continuance, as Zukofsky wrote of Charles Reznikoff’s poetry: “There is to be noted in Reznikoff’s lines the isolation of each noun so that in itself it is an image, the grouping of nouns so that they partake of the quality of things being together without violence to their individual intact natures” (P+ 197).

The poetics articulated here constitutes a kind of active passivity, beginning with a “sincerity” in which “shapes *appear*.... Writing *occurs*... *thinking with* the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody. Shapes *suggest* themselves” (194, italics mine) and proceeding to an “objectification” which is born out of the mind’s having been “[p]resented with sincerity”—the “perfect appreciation” and “rested totality” of a poem that neither “records” nor “incites” but *is*, “writing (audibility in two-dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such” (194). The creative activity of the writer is restricted to reception of what things appear, exist, occur, suggest themselves, and then “of directing them along a line of melody.” The ideal of the “writer of music” of Song 28 (Zukofsky surely enjoyed the prepositional play here: the poet as one who *writes* music, who *has* music, and who *belongs* to music) is that such direction or arrangement would permit and preserve the “tactility” of the objects or “notes” so arranged, while yet “moving towards a definite shape,” the “line of melody” that is the “rested totality” supplied by the mind of the reader. Such a poetics is highly democratic, assigning a degree of creative power not only to the reader (as Zukofsky wrote in the 1950 “A Statement for Poetry,” “The best way to find out about poetry is to read the poems. That way the reader becomes something of a poet himself: not because he ‘contributes’ to the poetry, but because he finds himself subject of its energy” [Prep+ 23]) but to the objects of the poem, including of course the words and letters (“shapes appear concomitants of word

combinations”). It deliberately blurs the distinction between creation and reception while de-emphasizing language’s rhetorical or performative dimensions in favor of what Roman Jakobson calls its “phatic” dimension, its “thereness,” the communication of communicativity or “languageness,” which is one good guess at what Zukofsky means by “the individual intact nature” of the word-as-object.

For Timothy Morton, such writing would constitute an “ambient poetics” with profound imaginative possibilities for a “deep ecology.” Morton’s concept of ambience derives from music producer Brian Eno, who in the mid-1970s “set about recording music deliberately designed to evoke and/or take place in an ‘atmosphere,’ space whose quality had become minimally significant, as one would tint a clear glass or introduce a faint perfume into the surrounding air. The traditional Western view of music sets up an opposition between foreground sound and ‘background’ noise—sounds that are precisely not foregrounded, as Jacques Attali has concisely demonstrated. Rather than this, Eno proposed that music deconstruct the opposition between foreground and background, or more precisely, between figure and ground.” (“Twinkle” ¶14). An ambient poetics requires three components or aspects: the first is characterized by a “minimal signification” derived from Derrida’s “re-mark,” which Morton charmingly paraphrases as follows:

When Woodstock “speaks” in the Charlie Brown cartoons, the only reason we can ascertain that the little strokes of black are his speech is the speech bubble around them. This is a minimized degree of speech, not a metaphysical zero-degree (a structuralist concept) but an *infinitesimal* degree. It is thus not correct to agree with the physicist Brian Greene, who designates the letter as the zero degree of language (Greene 141). “Language-ness,” the notion that we are in the presence

of language, can get along without letters. This is what ambient poetics seeks to convey. (“Twinkle” ¶26)

“The second element of ambient poetry is what I have decided to call *rendu*, after Chion's view of certain kinds of movie in which a special feature of the filmic medium itself is taken as an aspect of its content (Chion 109-11). The making of the medium into a message I take to be a prime condition of ambient poetry” (“Twinkle” ¶28). Morton goes on to describe a particular form of *rendu* applicable to the poem he is discussing (Jane Taylor's “The Star,” better known as the children's lullaby, “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”): the “lingual voice” that appears, as in the case of a voice-over in a film, as “*a voice without a subject*. Far from being the phonocentric locus of the logos, as in certain versions of deconstructive theory, this voice is a disturbingly asignifying element of language, which floats free of its content and form” (“Twinkle” ¶29, italics in original). The third dimension of ambient poetics is what Morton calls “contact as content”:

In ambient poetics, the medium in which communication takes place becomes the message that is communicated. In the terms of the structuralist Roman Jakobson's “Closing Statement,” the contact becomes the content in ambient literature (Jakobson 355-6). “The Star” exists in a specific performative context: it is a lullaby. It is thus to some extent an illocutionary statement, a statement designed to perform a direct effect as would a spell, a mantra or the “so be it” of “Amen.” The repetition of the repetitious “Twinkle, twinkle” in perhaps an imperative mood at the end of the poem (the mood slips between indicative and imperative) is the conjuration of the world in language, a world that hesitates between subject and object. (“Twinkle” ¶31)

All three aspects of ambient poetics are directed toward the transformation of medium into message: an emphasis on language's "contact" or "phatic" dimension that blurs the distinction between figure and ground. In the Jakobson essay cited, the "contact" dimension of language—one of six "factors inalienably involved in verbal communication" (353) is described as "messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works ('Hello, do you hear me?'), to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention ('Are you listening?' or in Shakespearean diction, 'Lend me your ears!'—and on the other end of the wire 'Um-hum!')" (355). Speech acts dominated by the phatic have a suggestively primordial quality for Jakobson: "The endeavor to start and sustain communication is typical of talking birds; thus the phatic function of language is the only one they share with human beings. It is also the first verbal function acquired by infants; they are prone to communicate before being able to send or receive informative communication" (356). For Morton, an ambient poetics that emphasizes the phatic has potentially far-reaching consequences for ecological thought; as he puts it in another essay, "Ambience is a poetic enactment of a state of nondual awareness that collapses the subject-object division, upon which depends the aggressive territorialization that precipitates ecological destruction. Furthermore, this collapse of subject-object dualism, however temporary in experience, spontaneously gives rise to howsoever weak a sense of warmth towards one's world, in which one is included. This world, to say more, is a world without center or edge that includes everything" ("Why Ambient Poetics" 52). The phatic conjures an environment prior to any content, any human world; as the point of contact "a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication," it is necessarily prior to "CONTEXT—briefly the so-called REFERENTIAL, 'denotative,' 'cognitive' function" and also to "a CODE

fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and the addressee” (Jakobson 353). The phatic or ambient poem resembles Heidegger’s famous jug in his essay “The Thing,” quoted to good effect by Jed Rasula in *This Compost* in reference to the concluding lines of Stevens’ “The Snow Man,” which “beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is”:

With these lines the poem closes in on that vessel (bearing in mind the alchemical vessel) that is the object of Heidegger’s scrutiny in “The Thing,” in which he maintains that the jug does not contain its liquid; rather, “The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel’s holding. The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel.... The vessel’s thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds” (*Poetry, Language, Thought*, 169); “in the shattering of the cup    He / keeps the cup,” [Robert] Duncan writes.

The work of snowman, jug, or poem is not to exist *as* that material phenomenon, but to bring to focus the space and to enlarge the sapience through which pass transient forms with their combustible magnifications. The blank aperture the language itself holds in trust is exemplified by the shifters (deictic terms like pronouns and prepositions—you and this, she and there and now—the meaning of which is always context specific), the clearing into which articulate combinations of material reform and trope themselves back to unboundedness. (89-90)

The emphasis on “shifters” and the small particles of language is key to an ambient poetics, which derives from what Morton calls “environmental awareness not based on conceptuality, or what elsewhere I have called ‘ecologocentrism’” (53).

Compare this with Zukofsky's radical rejection of the claims of myth, his statement in "Poetry: For My Son When He Can Read" that "a case can be made out for the poet giving some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a*: both of which are weighted with as much epos and historical destiny as one man can perhaps resolve" (P+ 10), and his corresponding statement in "A"-22 that "History's best emptied of names' / impertinence." For Morton, an ambient poetics questions the distinction between persons and their environment by dialectically implicating each in the other: "This would provide a more appropriate philosophical view (I am reluctant to say 'ontological foundation') for a deep ecology, an ecology that could assume that a politics of the environment must be coterminous with a change in the view of those who exist in/as that environment. A poetry that articulated the person as environment would not invert anthropocentrism into 'ecocentrism' but would thoroughly undo the very notion of a center" (54). It is this attack on centrism itself that allies ambient poetics with Certeauvian bricolage and opposes it to ecology-as-myth and "the potential fascism of ecological thought":

Ecology must proceed against identity, in the name of post-identity, in the name of deconstructing a sense of self, which is, at any rate, predicated on the separation of self and world, however subtly these terms are defined. In the name of a more intimate relationship with reality, ecological politics must proceed paradoxically *against* the religion of ecotopianism that sustains the heartless world by giving voice to its cry of the heart "in a heartless world" while soothing it in dreams of environmental consciousness, objectified and reified as is Marx's famous "opium of the people" (64). In short, ecological critique must proceed against religion and religiosity of all kinds, against sincerity and guilt, against anything that guarantees a stable sense of

independent and single identity beyond, above, or behind the world, which is the world of environmental awareness itself, without the dualism of subject and object. This world already includes a paradoxical sense of self in relation to world, a *duality* that is very ironical and full of humor and laughter, not a dualism or a monism.

(55)

We must therefore distinguish Zukofskyan “sincerity” from ecotopian sincerity, which is the flip side of guilt—as Morton writes, “In teaching classes on literature and ecology, I have noticed that ecological sentiment often entails a lot of guilt, which reinforces subject-object dualism, which is toxic to the environment; and so forth. Guilt, as Slavoj Žižek has observed, reproduces the illusion of a metalinguistic vantage point outside one’s world: the confident vulgar poststructuralist cliché that ‘there is no metalanguage’ is asserted from just such a position; and so is the guilt that is only a sniff away from the White Man’s Burden” (54). Zukofsky’s notion of sincerity, when linked to the objectification that seems to depend upon the reader’s appreciative mind (“appreciation” being an aesthetic mode of apprehension distinct from conceptualization or practical interest), is immersed and immanent, “undo[ing] the very nature of a center” by attempting to put writer, language, the objects represented by that language, and the reader of the poem all on the same plane. This should not be confused with the achievement of or desire for a Hegelian reconciliation of subject and object: Objectivist poetics, like ambient poetics, is presided over by the dialectical spirit of nonidentity, which is radically opposed to the myth of reconciliation that, in Pound’s *Cantos*, begins with Dante, passes through Confucius, and ends in Mussolini. As Morton reminds us, “figurative language is actually able to heighten a sense of the radical non-identity of things. Instead of fighting deconstruction in the name of presence and faith, ecological thought should

fully be taking account of deconstruction in the name of nonidentity, not of absence, and in the name of the proper development of our relationship with our world, not that of a retreat from the fundamental questions posed by religion” (55). Zukofsky’s love of wordplay is linked to his concern for nonidentity, the “tactility” of objects that, combined and recombined, offer “a relief from ethics, an approach to the blue huckleberry.” This tactility manifests itself through Zukofsky’s practice of bricolage, which as described by Lévi-Strauss’ can sound like a prescription for a Modernist aesthetics that renders both the objects of poems and the poems themselves into “signs,” neither concepts nor images but partaking of the natures of both:

Images cannot be ideas but they can play the part of signs or, to be more precise, co-exist with ideas in signs and, if ideas are not yet present, they can keep their future place open for them and make its contours appear negatively. Images are fixed, linked in a single way to the mental act which accompanies them. Signs, and images which have acquired significance, may still lack comprehension; unlike concepts, they do not yet possess simultaneous and theoretically unlimited relations with other entities of the same kind. They are however already *permutable*, that is, capable of standing in successive relations with other entities—although with only a limited number and, as we have seen, only on the condition that they always form a system in which an alteration which affects one element automatically affects all the others.

(20)

While this description of a permutable system of relations among disparate objects strongly resembles the “tradition” and the “dissociation of sensibility” respectively described in Eliot’s essays “Traditional and the Individual Talent” and “The Metaphysical Poets,” the crucial difference is that the bricoleur does not, in R.P.

Blackmur's phrase, "add to the stock of available reality" but makes do by rearranging the given, what already exists: the "set which has yet to materialize... will ultimately differ from the instrumental set only in the internal disposition of its parts" (Lévi-Strauss 18). Further, the "parts" employed by the bricoleur always retain their own history and identity: "The elements which the 'bricoleur' collects and uses are 'pre-constrained' like the constitutive units of myth, the possible combinations of which are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their freedom of manoeuvre" (19). There is a necessary immanence to bricolage that attaches it to a specifically Objectivist conception of modernist poetics, while the symbolist poetics of Eliot and to some degree Pound have a transcendental orientation. In Lévi-Strauss' terms, the high Modernists are engineers (de Certeau would call them strategists), the Objectivists bricoleurs (or tacticians):

[T]he engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the "bricoleur" by inclination or necessity always remains within them. This is another way of saying that the engineer works by means of concepts and the "bricoleur" by means of signs. The sets which each employs are at different distances from the poles on the axis of opposition between nature and culture. One way indeed in which signs can be opposed to concepts is that whereas concepts aim to be wholly transparent with respect to reality, signs allow and even require the interposing and incorporation of a certain amount of human culture into reality. Signs, in Peirce's vigorous phrase, "address somebody." (19-20)

The language of the high Modernists is not conceptual in any strict sense, but there is still a substantive difference between a symbolist poetics that treats its

objects—words and the objects those words represent—as means toward a transcendental or totalizing end and the Objectivist poetics that insists on “extricating” words so that they maintain “their own existence in the plain of surrounding existence, tactility of materials become tangible” (CSP 63). This means rendering the objects of nature not in a transparent or universal language but as always already in some relation to human culture (a basic distinction between “pastoral poetry” and “nature poetry”). Zukofsky’s theory of sincerity and objectification depends not just on a reluctance to symbolize or anthropomorphize what is seen, but on a conviction that words and language are adequate symbols for the reality they describe, as though Pound’s dictum, “the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol” (“A Retrospect,” *Literary Essays* 5, italics in original) were reversible:

The economy of presentation in this writing is a reassertion of faith that the combined letters—the words—are absolute symbols for objects, acts, interrelations, thoughts about them. If not, why use words? The words, for example, render the equivalent of the sounds of things, sometimes of birds. (P+ 198)

The “reassertion of faith” expressed here may seem naïve; but Zukofsky is not merely expressing an onomatopoeic belief in the absolute correspondence of sign and referent. Words (whose materiality as “combined letters” he is careful to emphasize) represent not only objects but “states, act, interrelations, thoughts about them.” The labor of symbolist writing, which enlists language instrumentally along a vertical axis in the service of a meaningful totality (metaphoric writing), is deflected in Objectivist writing onto a horizontal plane of relation between the words themselves (metonymic writing). The transformation of labor into play is one of the key tropes of pastoral, and this trope manifests in Objectivist writing as a metonymic principle of construction strong enough to keep even the occasional metaphor in line:

There is to be noted in Reznikoff's lines the isolation of each noun so that in itself it is an image, the grouping of nouns so that they partake of the quality of things being together without violence to their individual intact natures. The simple sensory adjectives are as necessary as the nouns. If Reznikoff has written elsewhere of the "imperious dawn," the single abstract adjective occurs without the pang of reverie. The metaphor, as in all good writing, has been presented with conciseness in a word. (P+ 197)

Here the abstractness of Reznikoff's single adjective is valorized because for Zukofsky, its "conciseness in a word" has prevented the metaphor from being enlisted in a metaphoric structure; instead it serves as part of the metonymic unit of the phrase. The respect of difference in the arrangements of nouns that Zukofsky observes in Reznikoff's writing is homologous to its treatment of the things named by those nouns: respect for difference in the specificity of historical and geographic relations. Zukofsky denounces the "subterfuge" of contemporary writers of narrative poetry "with one eye on the glory that was Greece (Sophocles or the *Anthology*), or the glamour which was Arthurian romance, or the agility which was Chaucer, etc." and praises Reznikoff for having "looked about him (in the boroughs of New York)" (199). To mediate experience through "glory," "glamour," or "agility" is do violence to that experience by processing it, strategizing it according to imposed laws of power. Objectivist textuality is ecological in its orientation because it tries to dispense entirely with this kind of instrumental intentionality in poetry. By supplanting the labor of the finished product for the play of "sculpture not proceeded with" (194)—in which the formal, intentional impulse is allowed to lapse so that the stone of the sculpture remains present *as* stone—supplants the labor that goes into a "finished product." Within the space of the Objectivist poem the sway of poetic subjectivity—the

alternately imperious and tremulous “I” of Eliotic modernism—is restricted because the instrumental cognition that designates individuals as subjects and things as objects is restricted. The Objectivist resists the cognition, necessary for production, that destroys the entity of the objects it seizes upon as the materials for production—turning them into “standing reserve”<sup>9</sup>—while delimiting the subject as that which masters objects and is itself mastered by relations of production, pre-empting the possibility of other, non-productive relations between self and thing. Zukofsky attempts to opt out of the relations of poetic production in which perceived experience (and the language of its perception) is exploited by the poet-capitalist who seeks to establish a monopoly of meaning. Instead he allies himself with the oppressed “things” and attempts a revolution on their behalf—giving an entirely different spin to Williams’ declaration, “No ideas but in things.”

It is placing the self on the same level as the things, “thinking with the things as they exist,” that suggests Zukofsky’s move from bricolage to ecolage: a way of proceeding that subordinates the “project,” in Lévi-Strauss’ terms, to the pre-existing order of materials at least potentially rendered abject by the strategic operations of capital. Lévi-Strauss writes that for the bricoleur, “it is always earlier ends which are called upon to play the part of means: the signified changes into the signifying and vice versa” (21). De Certeau would modify this by asserting that is the strategist’s territorializing ends that are appropriated as temporal means by the tactician, who carves out an “everyday” appropriate to him from what can be found at hand in the hostile territory in which he is forced to live. The ecolour wishes to do the same, but his major tactic is to free up difference, to restore entity and an experience of being to the waste materials or (a move that of course includes but is not restricted to natural

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1977, 1993): 322.

objects) from which he constructs his temporary habitation. For Lévi-Strauss, what the bricoleur achieves

will always be a compromise between the structure of the instrumental set and that of the project. Once it materializes the project will therefore inevitably be at a remove from the initial aim (which was moreover a mere sketch), a phenomenon which the surrealists have felicitously called “objective hazard.” Further, the “bricoleur” also, and indeed principally, derives his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he “speaks” not only *with* things, as we have already seen, but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities. The “bricoleur” may not ever complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it.

(21)

The Objectivist writer becomes an *ecoleur* precisely through his emphasis on “objective hazard”: the persistence of “the structure of the instrumental set” (both the poem’s objects and the poem as object) is the goal of her practice. While the bricoleur’s objects are appropriated from the Other of territorialized power, repurposing the resources that are not intended for her, the *ecoleur* seeks to rescue them from their abjected status as standing reserve—to give them back their entity and by so doing, restore her own. Again I refer to the kind of “active passivity” or “letting be” audible in Zukofsky’s sentence, “Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody.” Writing *occurs*, one thinks *with* the things *as they exist*; one directs them *along a line of melody* which suggests a role for the writer as organizer and improviser

rather than maker of myths or technological manipulator (both ultimately forms of *techne* that convert their objects into standing reserve).

Zukofsky found the necessary predicate for this Objectivist *Gelassenheit* in the dictates of Pound and what Zukofsky perceived as Pound's own objectivity and precision in the early *Cantos*. The implied aesthetic prescriptions in the passage from *29 Songs*—"straight incisions," "tactility," and "further coincidence or intersection"—roughly correspond to Pound's formulae for phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia, which Zukofsky more straightforwardly recast in "A Statement for Poetry" as "The Objects of Poetry: *Poems*—rhythmic compositions of words whose components are A. Image B. Sound C. Interplay of Concepts (judgments of other words either abstract or sensible, or both at once)" (Prep+ 21). Pound was certainly Zukofsky's most important model for "sincerity" and "objectification"; in his 1929 essay "Ezra Pound," what most forcibly impressed Zukofsky about the older poet's *Cantos* were their "simplicity" in the sense that "the content is the poetry, or that the words are bare and stripped of ornament" (Prep+ 74). Zukofsky admired how "Pound's objectivity and range are... his only identifications. He has not obtruded personally, never found it worth his while to discover an interesting subjective self to please people. One does not generally deplore sincere attempts at self-discovery but notes that Pound's objectivity in the *Cantos* is an excellent way of doing it" (82). Zukofsky's Pound is a Dante without theology, which circumstance is linked directly to the modernist doctrine of impersonality that Zukofsky calls "objectivity": "The lack of argumentative piety in Pound's contemporary world does not permit his continual explicit appearance on the scene nor a simple passage from inferno to purgatorio to paradiso" (75). This idea leads Zukofsky to try and rescue Pound from his own tendency toward myth-making as regards the natural world: "At intervals his presence occurs in the manner of a judgment: yet one naturally identifies the revenge of his

choros nympharum with the intricacy of the renewal of matter, rather than with the determinism of the theologian's geometry" (76). As I have shown, this can only be a misreading of Pound's desire to construct, if not a new theology, at least a new poetico-political totality from a nature refracted through the prisms of Greek myth, Confucian philosophy, and the Fascist agrarianism to be summed up in Pound's book title *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*. But that misreading is a key marker of the difference between Pound the builder of ideological systems and the Zukofsky who could imagine that an engagement with "the intricacy of the renewal of matter" could provide "a relief from ethics, an approach to the blue huckleberry."

For Zukofsky, Pound's "literary make-up which notices" the negative pastoral of Tian the musician in Canto 13 "is inwrapped with the philosophy of Kung" (68-69) but Zukofsky himself seems to favor Tian when he offers this paraphrase of the poem: "Concern with 'the bright principle of our reason,' with the use of Ta Hio or The Great Learning as a gauge of action, involves: recognition of the beauty of everytime in which alone we have being; interest in the present, so that life, as Pound has said, may not make mock of motion and humans not move as ossifications" (69). The creative present of "everytime" is the Arcadian present of "The old swimming hole / And the boys flopping off the planks / Or sitting in the underbrush playing mandolins" (quoted on 68); Kung's political philosophy of order or character ("'Character' implies enough order to be radiated outward" [69]) has this "everytime" as its goal; an ideology of being-present that implicitly negates ideology as being-for-the-future. Zukofsky's own utopian impulses at this time will not permit him to rest here; foreseeing no Fascism in 1929, Zukofsky instead assimilates the Pound of the early *Cantos* to his own socialist leanings:

It follows that Pound has been both the isolated creator and the worldly pamphleteer. To put the defences of his own being in order, he

has drafted himself into the defense of innovation clarifying and making sincere the intelligence. Contrasted with the leavings of transcendentalism and belated scholasticism around him, he has said that “Lenin invented ... a new medium, something between speech and action which is worth ... study”; (*Exile* 4, 1928).

That the Soviet Idea is as old as the Ta Hio’s “Private gain is not prosperity.” (69-70)

Lenin’s “new medium... between speech and action,” which might bear the name of praxis, shows that Zukofsky recognized the high utopian ambitions Pound had for his writing, even as Zukofsky characterizes him as putting “the defences of his own being in order” rather than those of any State, suggesting that “the worldly pamphleteer” is forced to function as such primarily on the behalf of “the isolated creator.” The stage is set for Zukofsky’s own utopian ambition in “A”, which in its early stages attempts to reconcile a Marxian “theology” with the musical-mathematical methodology of precision and sincerity associated with the name of J.S. Bach. But it is the Pound of “the beauty of everytime in which alone we have being” that was ultimately to have the most lasting impression on Zukofsky and to start him on his own path toward writing negative pastoral.

## ***2. Ambience and Collage in Zukofsky’s Shorter Poems***

To claim for Objectivist writing, as Zukofsky did for Pound, that “the content is the poetry,” is to claim a simple and direct access to “content”—the objects of the world that the poem and its elements imitate and coexist with rather than represent. This is the stance taken in Zukofsky’s early poetry, in which “the path to the blue huckleberry” is a path toward the aesthetic appreciation of what we might call the Arcadia of mere being:



flow into likening the reflection of city lights in the river to a “Leopard, glowing spotted.” The “Leopard” recalls the uneasy assimilation described in *Poem Beginning “The”* “255 And leopard in their spots” in *Poem Beginning “The”*. As for “The Dragon,” the last paragraph of “28: ‘Specifically, a writer of music’” from *29 Songs* provides a crucial paraphrase; not in the sense of explaining the word, but in multiplying its possibilities, in effect extending the reach of the precision of the poem’s language by going back again and again to the dictionary:

Whirl, dip, and a swing! The duenna is a dragon! What is it, inflexible Draco, that is fabulous, has wings unlike a serpent, and is a monster! Come on! Come on! drag your brains! The Northern constellation? Guess again! A short, large-bored firearm of the 17<sup>th</sup> century or the soldier who carried it? That was before your time, what do you know about it? The small arboreal Asiatic lizard (genus *Draco!*) leaps aided by a parachute formed by lateral expansions of the skin supported by elongated and extensible hind ribs. What shall we say of the little flying lizards, what of the metamorphosis of the dragonfly, its four large wings and enormous eyes? Shall we call them with fourfold-thought of gentleness the devil’s darning needle. The dragon is a duenna! The dragon has an inner paddle-shaft like a marine engine! The dragon is an excavator that draws the soil upward and away from the working-base thus clearing it. Scripturally, *tannim*, the meaning of which is uncertain. There went up a smoke out of his nostrils, and fire out of his mouth devoured: coals were kindled by it.—Wounds stink.—Caused men to ride over our heads. As smoke is driven away, so drive them away. (To the chief Musician, Psalms 18, 38, 66, 68!) (CSP 64)

This exuberant riff derived from Zukofsky's dictionary-play offers us a glimpse of the technique that will come to dominate his later poetry: the imploded collage of individual words by which a kind of lateral or "letteral" syntax is created between a given word as it appears in a line and all of its possible homonyms, synonyms, and etymological antecedents.<sup>10</sup> In the later poetry it will be the pressure exerted by deviations from the normative syntax of the sentence and line that compresses the coal of each word into a multifaceted refracting diamond; here the lateral maneuver is performed ex post facto by a text separated from "Not much more than being" by a number of pages and a number of years.<sup>11</sup> As toward the end of that book when the sestina "Mantis" is followed by "Mantis: An Interpretation," Zukofsky shows a predilection for explanations and interpretations that do neither in any conventional sense, but rather complicate and expand the possibilities of their originals through an act of interpretation as performance. Not the least important function of such games is to put the value of the originals *qua* originals into question, as the pseudo-scholarly apparatus of *Poem Beginning "The"* satirizes not just *The Waste Land* but the urge toward canonicity in general: the will-to-power manifested by modernist texts and the efforts of authors like Eliot and Pound to control their reception. The goal is not, however, simply to foil efforts at meaning-making, though such might be inferred by Zukofsky's conversion of the dragon—now approaching stable existence as an excavating machine—into the Hebrew word *tannim*, generally

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<sup>10</sup> "'A' develops a notion of language that 'explores the literal—*letteral*—level of language itself, in a horizontal investigation of the polysemous meanings simultaneously available in the words themselves—in etymologies and puns—and in the things the words name.' In short, the poem begins to 'elevate the material of the signifier over the meanings of the signified.'" Tim Woods quoting from Gregory Ulmer's 1985 article, "The Object of Post-Criticism," in *The Poetics of the Limit*, p. 203.

<sup>11</sup> "Despite the suggestion of a distinction in genre, the division into *29 Poems* and *29 Songs* appears determined more by date of composition: the former composed between 1924-1929 and the latter 1931-1934." Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas, "Notes to Short Poetry," *Z-site*, 22 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.ofscollge.edu.sg/z-site/notes-to-poetry/55-Poems-1941.php>>.

translated as “dragon” in the Bible but in fact of uncertain meaning.<sup>12</sup> “The Dragon” from *29 Poems* has disappeared into a Scriptural origin that can have no certain meaning—a dead end that confounds syntactical or etymological or even theological logic. The dragon presides over both “Not much more than being” and “Specifically, a writer of music” as an emblem of all its possible meanings—a constellation more in the Benjaminian sense than an astronomical one. Still these meanings do coalesce into an image of power and domination, whether as a fabulous lizard, a duenna (a kind of governess to royalty), or the warlike God of the Psalms that Zukofsky names. The actual animals that can bear the name “dragon” provide the exception to this rule: “The small arboreal Asiatic lizard (genus *Draco!*) leaps aided by a parachute formed by lateral expansions of the skin supported by elongated and extensible hind ribs.” The zoological, natural fact of this leaping lizard acts as a partial counter to the monstrous dragon that is otherwise marked as both an emblem of industrial power and the vengeful God of the Hebrew psalms. Zukofsky’s dragon is preserved as a constellation by this deviation: the natural fact of genus *Draco* becomes the stray star or node that prevents the whole from becoming a transparent figure, while enacting a dialectic between the dragon of nature and the dragon of social-theological power. We might supplement the image of the constellation with the idea of a hologram, a three-dimensional image that can be reassembled in its entirety from any one of its shards. The word “dragon” is both shard and whole as our attention shifts back and forth from referent to signifier, from literal to letteral. The third dimension—the vertical—never quite comes into focus, but exists as a ghostly presence, the chimera of the “immanent transcendent” that arises from Objectivist writing when put under maximum pressure.

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<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas, “Notes to Short Poetry,” *Z-site*, 22 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.ofscollge.edu.sg/z-site/notes-to-poetry/29-Songs.php>>.

All of these meanings for “The Dragon” exist simultaneously upon the same plane, following the rules of a bricolage that works subtly against hierarchies of meaning. Yet we should not lose sight of the original poem and the movement it presents, which can be summarized as follows: 1) a bare evocation of the act of aesthetic cognition, “at evening, to expect / at a river-front”; 2) a minimal image of minimal machinery in which the motive force is obscured by what it moves (“A shaft dims / With a turning wheel”); 3) the appearance of human beings laboring by or on “a broken wagon”; 4) a complex image that seems to combine city and stars in the surface of the “glowing-spotted, / The summer river.” From contemplating “Not much more than being” the poem moves to an image of labor that tacitly completes and sublates “Thoughts of isolate, beautiful / Being at evening” into an image of nature transformed—a nature that includes and is included by urban life. The bareness and opacity of the images in the first three stanzas, yielding abruptly to a numinous glimpse of city-in-the-river and river-in-the-city (and the stars in both) creates what the “boy of Winander” section of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* describes as “a gentle shock of mild surprise,” the apprehension of what only the relaxation of one’s most anxious attention will allow to manifest. Zukofsky lets the “men” and their obscure labor exist alongside machinery and the ruins of machinery, the whole scene appearing under the “The Dragon:”—its colon (connecting “2: Not much more than being” with “3: Cocktails,” which imagines urban revelers as “Bacchae / among electric lights” [CSP 22]) confirming its holographic inclusivity. Under the dragon, city, workers, wagon, and river all exist on the same plane; the hierarchical binaries culture-nature and subject-object have been temporarily erased in the pursuit of “Not much more than being.” To adapt a comment of Timothy Morton’s about Wordsworth’s poem, “With its reflection of the heaven that is ‘uncertain’ (in one possible reading, beyond conceptualization), the lake becomes an objective correlative for the boy’s awareness.

In other words, the topic of this poem is *almost* nothing at all: the sensation of sentience, a ‘visible scene’” (“Why Ambient Poetics,” 53). Replace Wordsworth’s “uncertain heaven” for Zukofsky’s “Dragon,” “the boy’s awareness” for “the poem’s awareness,” and “the lake” with “The summer river,” and we have an accurate description of Zukofsky’s poem as an ambient one, bent on presenting the infrathin experience of “minimal signification.”<sup>13</sup>

In ambient poetics content is contact: we experience “the sensation of sentience” as we experience the emptiness, the negative space, defined and outlined by the artwork as by Heidegger’s jug:

When we fill the jug, the pouring that fills it flows into the empty jug. The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel’s holding. The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel.... But if the holding is done by the jug’s void, then the potter who forms sides and bottom on his wheel does not, strictly speaking, make the jug. He only shapes the clay. No—he shapes the void.... The vessel’s thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds. (“The Thing,” PTL 169)

The mystical note here that Heidegger is often criticized for becomes much more concrete when we recognize a potter/poet like Zukofsky “thinking with the things as they exist,” things that can have an abstract dimension, specifically conceptions of the historical and socioeconomic field in which his poetry takes place: [quote from

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<sup>13</sup> The notion of the “infrathin” derives from Marcel Duchamp and denotes a difference so minimal that “one can only give examples of it.” Such examples include “the warmth of a seat (which has just been left),” “Subway gates—The people / who go through at the very last moment,” and the question, “In time the same object is not the / same after a 1 second interval – what / relations with the identity principle?” Quoted in Marjorie Perloff, “‘But isn’t the same at least the same?’: Translatability in Wittgenstein, Duchamp, and Jacques Roubaud.” *Jacket* 14 (July 2001): <http://jacketmagazine.com/14/perl-witt.html> (14 February 2005).

*Prepositions* about “historical particulars” here]. In *55 Poems* the encounter is with a void space carved out of an urban space strategized by capital:

Buoy—no, how,  
It is not a question: what  
Is this freighter carrying?—  
Did smoke blow?—That whistle?—

Of course, commerce will not complete  
Anything, yet the harbor traffic is busy,  
there shall be a complete fragment

Of—

Nothing, look! that gull  
Streak the water!  
Getting nearer are we,  
Hear? count the dissonances,

Shoal? accost—cost  
Cost accounting. (CSP 23-24)

Poem 4 from *29 Poems* presents ambience negatively as “a complete fragment // Of-- // Nothing, look!” The shift from *nothing* to the imperative *look!* turns us from the harbor as territorialized by commerce to the gap in capital; the poem rescues an image from the “nothing” of exchange value (presented negatively in the stuttering last lines: “accost—cost / Cost accounting”) in an act of ecolage that attempts to preserve the experience of its being: “that gull / Streak the water!” Water is a recurrent image in *55 Poems*: as it surrounds the island of Manhattan it is both a natural fact and the territory or “shoal” of capitalist exchange for freighters and ferries. New York Harbor becomes a dialectical image in these poems in a move akin to that of Wordsworth in his sonnet, “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge,” of which Timothy Morton writes:

It is capital, then, that charges modern space with ambience, creating a force field of which nature (the Lake District that Wordsworth offers as a retreat from modernity) is actually an analogue rather than a counter-

image. The narrator of the sonnet becomes a minimalist version of what was later called the *flâneur*, analyzed in Benjamin's reading of Paris, wandering amidst metastasized capital—but the businesses are not even open yet (for an allusion to Wordsworth on the city in Benjamin's writing on Baudelaire, see Benjamin 231, 968; see Morton, *Spice* 235). (“Twinkle,” ¶51)

Zukofsky himself could be aptly described as a “minimalist... *flâneur*,” assembling the objects of his poems so as to delineate the negative space in which capital becomes visible and thus subject to attack. In *55 Poems* this is done by constantly juxtaposing natural with urban imagery, with the intent of reifying capitalism in an image and then undercutting that image. In Poem 5, “Ferry,” the word “green” functions as another dialectical image, a synecdoche for nature and capital “in almost / A dialogue” with each other:

Gleams, a green lamp  
In the fog:  
Murmur, in almost  
A dialogue

Siren and signal  
Siren to signal.

Parts the shore from the fog,  
Rise there, tower on tower,  
Signs of stray light  
And of power.

Siren to signal  
Siren to signal.

Hour-gongs and the green  
Of the lamp.

Plash. Night. Plash. Sky. (CSP 24)

The green lamp alludes to Andrew Marvell's “Bermudas” (“He hangs in shades

the orange bright, / Like golden lamps in a green night”) and recalls that poem’s acute ambivalence toward pastoral abundance as that which renders labor unnecessary; it also recalls Marvell’s “The Garden” as a light “Annihilating all that’s made / To a green thought in a green shade.” In *almost* a dialogue with itself, the green lamp becomes a figure for the tension between, in Jakobson’s terms, the “contact” dimension of language and the “referential” or denotative dimension: the move from “Siren *and* signal” to the repeated “Siren *to* signal” suggests that the possible signifieds of the green “siren” (a warning or alarm; a dangerous agent of seduction as in *The Odyssey*) are sublated by its ambiguous factuality as “signal,” as a “permutable” sign in Lévi-Strauss’ sense: “Signs, and images which have acquired significance, may still lack comprehension; unlike concepts, they do not yet possess simultaneous and theoretically unlimited relations with other entities of the same kind” (20). The dialectical flickering of the green lamp between these different functions of language literally reveals and illuminates the city as concretized capital: “Parts the shore from the fog, / Rise there, tower on tower, / Signs of stray light / And of power.” (The stable illumination provided by this dialectical ambience is reinforced for the reader by the rhyming quatrain.) The poem ends with an assertion of “contact” as precondition for Zukofsky’s “poetic” in Jakobson’s sense of the word: “The set (*Einstellung*) toward the MESSAGE as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language.... This function, by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects” (356). In the last line, nature (the night, the sky) appears or is revealed between iterations of the onomatopoetic “Plash,” a signifier whose aural or musical properties are not separated from what it signifies; its meaning entirely depends on the “minimal signification” of ambience for us to recognize it less as word than as imitation of a natural sound. The onomatopoetic signifier is contiguous to what it signifies: it is metonymic. In the

ferry's wake nature follows, communicating "not much more than being." This Stevensian emphasis on the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is recurs throughout *55 Poems*, but with a historical-materialist emphasis rather than an epistemological one. Poem 17:

Cars once steel and green, now old,  
Find their grave at Cedar Manor.  
They rust in a wind  
The sky alone can hold.

For the wind  
Flows heavily thru the mind like cold,  
Drums in the ears  
Till one knows its being which soon is not. (CSP 31)

The rusting of cars in a junkyard is presented as a natural process: not just in their aging, but in the fact that the cars were "once steel *and* green," suggesting a synthesis of nature with the products of man's industrial labor. It is the "wind / The sky alone can hold" that is the figure for this ecological synthesis, with "sky" being the horizon of nature that contains the human world. The wind is a voiceless voice that "Drums in the ears": again a natural sound is metonymically associated with the contact dimension of language, which minimally signifies its transitory presence, "Till one knows its being which soon is not." As in "Ferry," the fleeting voice of being is communicated not in the skeptical contemplation of nature (the poetic situation of Stevens' "The Snow Man") but by the dialectical image of rusting cars in which capital and nature, "steel and green," flicker and reveal each as the negative of the other. This fragmentary positing of a fleeting experience of nature as being, discovered by moving simultaneously away from and toward industrial capitalism, is pastoral on the micro level: a minimalist version of negative pastoral. It is a moment of relief—a "blue huckleberry"—extracted from a system of capitalist production that Zukofsky criticizes more directly—and less dialectically—in poems like Song 23, "The Immediate Aim" and in the early movements of "A".

At this point we can turn to the famous statement of Zukofsky's poetics from "A"-12 and recognize the "limits" of his poetry as poles emphasizing different functions within Jakobson's model of verbal communication:

I'll tell you.  
About my *poetics* –

$$\int \begin{array}{l} \text{music} \\ \text{speech} \end{array}$$

An integral  
Lower limit speech  
Upper limit music

No? (A-12/138)

One of several statements of poetics to be found in "A"-12 (the most succinct being, "As I love: / My poetics" [A-12, 151]), here "Speech" seems closest to the denotative or *referential* function, while "music" would seem to refer to the *poetic* function that "promot[es] the palpability of signs" (Jakobson 356). (It seems notable that neither "limit" is easily interpretable as referring to those dimensions of language that emphasize the role of the speaker.) Later, Zukofsky presents us with another pair of integrals:

Better a fiddle than geiger?  
With either there is so much in 1  
And in one:

$$\int \begin{array}{l} 1 \\ -1 \end{array} \int \begin{array}{l} \text{sound} \\ \text{story – eyes: thing thought} \end{array} \quad (\text{A-12/173})$$

The geiger counter, a tool of measurement with ominous implications for humanity and the environment, is contrasted with the musical instrument mastered by Zukofsky's son Paul and emblematic of his conception of poetry as music (recall the first lines of "A"-1: "A / Round of fiddles playing Bach" [A-1/1]). "Sound" is placed

in the “upper limit” position occupied by music on page 138, while the “lower limit” appears as a kind of equation if we read the hyphen between “story” and “eyes” as a minus sign. “Speech” then becomes the register of “story”—narrative, denotation, reference—with the organs of perception (and subjectivity, given Zukofsky’s frequent conflation of “eyes” with “I’s”) subtracted to become a “thing thought.” Speech thus surprisingly becomes as much an index of the abstract as we would expect music to be, while the concrete and bodily eye/I becomes by implication that which mediates between these two levels. Still, for Zukofsky abstractions are every bit as much things as trees and cars provided that they participate in poetic speech: “distinct from print which records action and existence and incites the mind to further suggestion, there exists, though it may not be harbored as solidity in the crook of an elbow, writing (audibility in two-dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such” (“An Objective,” P+ 13). Thus in “A”-14, Zukofsky elaborates upon his “integral” (a mathematical term describing an area) in bodily and material terms:

lower limit body  
 upper limit dance,  
 lower limit dance

upper limit speech,  
 lower limit speech  
 upper limit music,

lower limit music  
 upper limit *mathémata*  
*swank for things*

*learned (349)*

Zukofsky here establishes a continuum of expression in which rhythmic movement (with the geiger counter at one pole and the fiddle at the other) acts as the sublating principle by which body is assimilated to dance, dance to speech, speech to music, and music to knowledge (not only mathematical knowledge; “*mathémata*” is a Platonic

word that Zukofsky wryly paraphrases as a “*swank*” term “for *things // learned*”). This rhythm (the “line of melody” of “Sincerity and Objectification”) is how Zukofsky conceptualizes what Jakobson calls the contact dimension of language: it initiates and sustains communication. The space swankly symbolized as an integral (∫) is the space of human perception, which is both a contingent historical particular and the site of poetry as negatively defined by two poles or limits: poetry is neither the abstract of music (Jakobson’s “poetic” function) nor the abstract of speech (the “referential”), but is bounded by these abstractions, which when pursued beyond the limits of poetry once again become the domain of things that, according to Zukofsky’s adoption of Spinozan monism, are in fact one substance with different attributes: the body on one end, purely mental “*things / learned*” at the other. Zukofsky’s poetics is the site of the eye, which at the one pole is subtracted from “story” and at the other pole abstracted into “sound.” The point is to look and listen for oneself: paraphrasing Pound in the poem “Peri Poietikes,” Zukofsky writes, “*Look in your own ear and read*” (CSP 213). But Zukofsky’s integral also describes the space in which poetic perception can happen, a space in which language takes its cues from natural objects and is in fact considered as one of them:

TREE—SEE?

—I see  
     by  
     your tree

—What  
     do you  
     see (CSP 216)

The short poems that compose the 1959-1960 sequence “I’s (pronounced *eyes*)” combine the quick flash of perception (usually of the natural world) traditionally associated with Japanese haiku with the Zukofskyan letteral wordplay intended to put referent, signifier, and signified on the same cognitive plane. Poetic

vision (“SEE?”) is produced by the resonant rhyming “TREE” akin to the Mallarméan flower missing from all bouquets. The poet ascribes his own vision—his author-ity as poet—to what the reader “sees” when he or she reads the word “tree,” demonstrating anew Zukofsky’s conviction that “The best way to find out about poetry is to read the poems. That way the reader becomes something of a poet himself: not because he ‘contributes’ to the poetry, but because he finds himself subject of its energy” (“A Statement for Poetry,” P+ 23). The poem is oriented toward the reader not in Jakobson’s sense of the conative (the dimension of language through which the speaker attempts to produce a reaction in the listener), but more radically: the reader does not “contribute” to the poetry but *produces* it (not least through performing the labor demanded by the poem’s manifest difficulty) and in so doing produces Zukofsky *qua* poet. Zukofsky as Objectivist becomes Zukofsky as object, assigning the burdens and privileges associated with subjectivity and lyric poetry to the reader with a question that’s also an imperative: “—What / do you / see.” This is in accordance with the Spinozian poetics ascribed to Zukofsky by Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas , in which reader, poet, and poem are all entities participating in the same totality of being:

The poem has its own nature or definition, which is the desire for perfection (being, reality), which at the same time is necessarily immanent in and mediated through the historical and social totality, that is, “nature as creator” (Spinozian Nature or “nature as creator” must not be confused with the Romantic conception of Nature). Furthermore, I want to argue that this leads Zukofsky toward a poetics that allows for a far larger place for the potential reader, which is what I take to be the implication of Zukofsky’s repeated assertion that poetry should avoid “predatory intent,” a writing without designs on the reader. The reader will necessarily engage the body that is the poetic text according to

their own nature and in Spinozian terms must do so freely in order to maximize their own activity, being, reality. If the poet, the poem and the reader are distinct entities, each with their own nature, nevertheless there is a formal sense of commonality in that they all necessarily endeavor to realize their being, which ultimately goes back to the fact that they are all immanent in the totality. (“Spinozian Poetics,” 2)

Such an approach to poetry puts the emphasis firmly on the contact dimension of language as that which communicates and manifests the totality in which these three entities participate. The poem can only realize its being as visionary “tree” with the active reciprocal participation of reader and poet. “SEE?”<sup>14</sup>

The choice of a tree to bring poetic vision into focus is not accidental: “I’s (pronounced *eyes*)” begins with a poem that, like “Not much more than being,” juxtaposes a natural image with an urban setting in such a way as to blur the distinction between figure and ground:

Hi, Kuh,  
  
those  
gold’n bees  
are I’s,  
  
eyes,  
  
skyscrapers. (CSP 214)

Zukofsky glosses the poem as follows in his 1968 interview with L.S. Dembo:

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<sup>14</sup> This poem was actually a collaboration between Zukofsky and Lorine Niedecker: “the first three-line phrase was written by LZ in a 16 Oct. 1959 letter responding to Niedecker’s letter to PZ in which she drew a tree and to which she responded with the latter phrase, which LZ recognized as a found poem” (Twitchell-Waas, *Z-site*: <http://www.ofscollege.edu.sg/z-site/notes-to-poetry/Is-pronounced-eyes-1963.php>). The fact that the intended reader of the first half of the poem was herself a poet who then completed the poem serves to corroborate the Zukofskyan notion of readerly reciprocity that I have elaborated here.

As at the beginning of “I’s (pronounced *eyes*)”... the *haiku*—  
 everybody’s writing *haiku*. You remember Elsie, Borden’s cow? That’s  
 what I meant, and I greeted her up on the sign there: “Hi, Kuh.” “Those  
 / gold’n bees / are I’s.” Obviously some apparition or vision. She’s up  
 there anyway and the golden bees... I don’t know, she makes honey.  
 The bees are also “eyes.” You were wondering which “eyes” see. On  
 the other hand, suppose, without my glasses, I look out at the tower—  
 “those / gold’n bees / are I’s, / eyes, / skyscrapers”: all I see is  
 Christmas crystallography. It’s wonderful, but absolutely astigmatic.  
 (P+ 243, ellipses in original)

The cow or “Kuh” is both a component of poetic form and a pastoral image of  
 Arcadian space, in this case literally projected on a billboard with the city surrounding  
 it. At the same time it is not an innocent image: Elsie is a corporate trademark and her  
 image is one of capital’s signatures. The “gold’n bees” could be part of the Arcadian  
 vision, emblems of labor (busy as bees) made beautiful—but they also have a  
 hallucinatory quality. Zukofsky puts the emphasis on the quality of vision: with his  
 glasses we have “some apparition or vision” but without them, “all I see is Christmas  
 crystallography.” It all depends on the I/eye: what you see is what there is within the  
 poem. It is an error to conclude that Zukofsky’s poetic is simply one of multiplicity: he  
 puts the emphasis on “read[ing] the poems” in order to “find out about poetry.” The  
 poem is a bearer of vision and subjectivity only once you’ve brought your particular  
 vision and subjectivity to bear on it. And as Zukofsky slyly implies, the self cannot be  
 reduced to a singular I/eye: he himself as a wearer of eyeglasses has at least four of  
 them. Zukofskyan vision is, at the least, double: “Hi, Kuh” gives us a pastoral image  
 that emerges out of—is in fact produced by—the urban cityscape, the linguistic  
 materialization of a desire the space for which has been momentarily hollowed out

from capital. At the same time the monuments of capital are configured as language itself writ large: the skyscrapers are letter “I’s” filling the speaker’s “eyes.”

Throughout “I’s (pronounced *eyes*),” Zukofsky resorts to images of nature as that which makes other wor(l)ds visible—nature is literally the *stuff* of them—while critiquing the tendency to instrumentalize both nature and language’s nature:

Red azaelas  
    make this  
    synagogue  
Not the  
    other way  
    round. (CSP 214)

.....  
AZURE

Azure  
as ever  
adz aver (CSP 217)

The synagogue, which is not just a building but a strategized institutional space, is “made” by the azaleas that are presumably to be seen around it or by its entrance; by implication, human institutions—in this case, one which claims access to the divine—do not make themselves but emerge from a natural background whose vividness is spoiled by a lack of the proper attention. By taking the side of the azaleas, Zukofsky tries to show how the power of institutions secretly depends upon nature and the creative human accession to nature (obviously, humans arranged the azaleas and so laid the ground for the labor of culture-making that is embodied or congealed in the synagogue). Later, Zukofsky playfully takes apart the word “azure,” a Mallarméan emblem of the transcendent and, as Mark Scroggins notes, “the weight of poetic tradition that the poet is desperately trying to escape or surmount” (*Louis Zukofsky* 113): here the word is broken down into components that reveal the infrathin distance between advertising and poetry. The resistance to the deadening forces of commodification and canonization is performed by the poem itself and its qualities of

attention to the letteral dimension of language that permits one word to give birth to other words, and reciprocally to locate the “azure” firmly within the debased language of “adz aver.” Natural objects—Elsie the cow, the red azaleas, the azure sky—are part of a single continuum with the language that names those objects, both of which can be seized and appropriated by agents of strategic power (capital, the patriarchal synagogue, literary tradition). Zukofsky’s approach to nature is never naive, but always comes embedded in the context of social and historical particulars. His pastoral impulses manifest as an ecolagic assembly of flowers and flower-words always precariously wrested from the grip of a history characterized by capitalist exploitation and the violent domination of nature, people, and language itself.

### *3. Intensive Ecolage in “A”-22*

Pastoral as a mode turns aside from the history it is nevertheless inevitably implicated in; a modernist-utopian pastoral actively reflects on that history even as it withdraws from the strategizing touch of the victors who write it, while a passive or sentimental pastoral becomes another mode of the dominant ideology. Louis Zukofsky’s pastoral impulse unfolds in response to a history of capitalist and imperialist exploitation that he refuses to reify—in part through modes of withdrawal, as when he denies historical events and personages their proper names in “A”-22 and “A”-23—but primarily through the tactic of ecolage, which can be an assemblage of methodologies as well as of individual linguistic elements. As Barrett Watten has written, “Zukofsky’s work... is a lifelong meditation on the horizon of liberation that was first understood in the class politics and theoretical framework of the Marxist tradition, and this is true even after the many moments in which those horizons were revised at crucial moments—the turn to Spinoza in “A”-9; to the family in “A”-11; to the everyday in “A”-12; to music throughout the second half of “A” and to language

particularly in "A"—16, 22, and 23; and to a literary horizon that makes the historical seem merely an occasion to be gone beyond, as either particular or universal, in his reception—literally, Zukofsky is a poet who was influenced by Marxism in his youth, but went beyond it for modernist horizons” (no page number). Watten goes on to argue that these multiple “turns” do not progress toward a singular Hegelian resolution but are preserved as the work progresses in a kind of constellation of horizons:

[A]t a certain point, much like an innovative software developer or hardware engineer, Zukofsky abandons previous systems while preserving their general operational capacity. He shows us how to do this in the famous epochal turn of “A”—9, where the language of one system—the empirico-critical method of Marx—is refunctioned (not simply translated) into an Spinozan operating system based on “love,” as we know. Since there is a deep convergence of the good to be redeemed by Marxism, in the opening of commodities to the labor and value congealed within them, and the love that, since the Symposium, is the most desirable form of that good, Zukofsky is performing a mode of deep overwriting, not simply an overthrow of a junked vocabulary.  
(n.p.)

A number of critics have pointed to “A”—9, Zukofsky’s tour-de-force double canzone published as *First Half of “A”—9* in 1940, with the second half being written in the years 1948-1950, as the crucial moment of transition between the Marxist utopian Zukofsky of the 1930s and the domesticated Zukofsky primarily concerned with his own family circle of the postwar years. The poem’s shift from Marx to Spinoza or “from labor to love” has been described by Tim Woods as “the redressing of an imbalance, a qualification and adjustment, or the articulation of a dialectical relationship between the two; primarily a shift that is not mutually exclusive but one

that significantly reorientates the progress and development of “A.” It lends the Objectivist poetics of ‘Sincerity and Objectification’ a specifically *ethical turn*” (103, italics in original). This is appealing for a reading of Zukofsky’s progress through “A” as a pastoral dialectic: as in Virgil’s *Eclogues*, the labor of shepherding is sublated by songs of love, here for a wife and son who are themselves musicians. But Watten’s constellation of turns is, I believe, a more accurate appraisal of the work of a poet who never lost sight of the “horizon of liberation” but who constantly sought new means for approaching and visualizing it, in part through the preservation of old techniques. Still, Zukofsky’s vision of liberation is emphatically a letteral one, dependent on the liberation of language from all instrumental contexts, all “predatory intent,” so that the lion of content might lie down with the lamb of form. Peter Quartermain thus makes a more radical claim for “A”-9 as Objectivist text: namely that the poem’s compacted vocabularies elude all claims of coherence as derived from content: “The Text is a movement of languages, of *a number of* frames of reference, held in the language of the poem simultaneously, *at once*. And it is a *felt* world, which is not, therefore, to be interpreted; one’s feelings are not subject to exegesis” (223, italics in original). Mark Scroggins puts it even more succinctly: “The text’s mimesis of exterior events is displaced by the text itself as event” (*Louis Zukofsky* 97). This is a claim for the poem as phenomenal object, dependent not on any “one element, one thread, one vocabulary only” but on “abstraction struggling for particularity. The particularity is found in the *collage* of contexts which accrete to the words ‘value,’ and ‘impulse,’ and ‘action,’ and so forth” (Quartermain 224, italics in original). Breaking normative expectations of grammar and syntax within a rigorous and arbitrary structure (Cavalcanti’s canzone, the distribution of “r” and “n” sounds according to the conic section, etc.) is the primary means toward this collage, which becomes recognizable as a bricolage in that it opposes itself to systems while making use of their components: “All systems

will their own closure,' says Hugh Kenner (*Counterfeiters*, p. 167), for all systems seek the sure, the safe, the secure, the explicable: they seek clarity, for they seek to predict. Their aim, then, is to avert crisis, to avoid risk" (Quartermain 220). The systemic is the strategic: Zukofsky as *ecoleur* turns not just a system's elements, but systemicity itself into a component of a collage whose goal is the liberation of nature. This is the "*collage of contexts*" that supports Zukofsky's claim in his introduction to a special 1963 issue of the journal *Blue Grass* for viewing his poems as self-arranging "found objects":

With the years the personal prescriptions for one's work recede, thankfully, before an interest that *nature as creator* had more of a hand in it than one was aware. The work then owns perhaps something of the look of *found objects* in late exhibits—which arrange themselves as it were, one object near another—roots that have become sculpture, wood that appears talisman, and so on: charms, amulets maybe, but never really such things since the struggles so to speak that made them do not seem to have been human trials and evils—they appear entirely *natural*.  
(“Found Objects (1962-1926),” *Prepositions*+ 168, italics in original)

For Zukofsky the *ecoleur*, no vocabulary is ever “junked”—or rather, all vocabularies are, and are all equally suited to the act of rearrangement and collage that permits the rediscovery of “nature as creator.” His statement helps us to ground Zukofsky's poetics in a vision of nature: of the poem and poet as participants in nature's own creative processes. Quartermain's claim for the objectification of “A”-9 perhaps goes too far when he claims that the poem is a felt thing and, as such, “one's feelings are not subject to exegesis.” One's feelings may indeed elude interpretation, but the fact of feeling—the phenomenology of the poem-thing as radiantly active text—has rich implications for a Zukofskyan pastoral of liberation. For one, it is

another indicator of the primacy of the contact dimension of language in Zukofsky's work: on an experience of reading as such in which the reader "find himself subject of [the poem's] energy." The poet's relation to such a poem and such a reader is not that of creator, any more than his relationship to nature is that of the egotistical sublime. He becomes a shepherd of words within a formal space more or less rigorously confined and separated from strategically defined fields of language—including symbolically or otherwise hierarchically defined poetic fields. The goal, as Watten suggests, is the constant re-vision of the horizons of Zukofsky's poetry of liberation: a desire to preserve the fact of poetic communication—the contact dimension of language—as an Arcadian space, a necessarily empty universal which no particular content can occupy for long. Reading the late poetry is, as Scroggins puts it using a phrase of George Steiner's, an experience of "ontological difficulty": "*Ontological* difficulties confront us with blank questions about the nature of human speech, about the status of significance, about the necessity and purpose of the construct which we have, with more or less rough and ready consensus, come to perceive as a poem" (quoted in *Louis Zukofsky* 232). Reading for pastoral—for the experience of provisional liberation, which is also a liberation of the provisional—I would amend Steiner's statement to say that Zukofskyan ontological difficulties confront us with the nature of human speech as a question of the blank: the white space of saying, the poem as generator of the energy of subjectivity. At the same time, language alone does not form the horizon of this poetry: the language of natural history provides the primary source material for "A"-22, while *80 Flowers* combines and collapses language from such herbaries as *Taylor's Encyclopedia of Gardening* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) and *Gray's Manual of Botany* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.) (Leggott 19) with literary sources like Chaucer and Shakespeare, with a close, punning attention paid as well to the Greek and Latin etymology of the flowers' common and Linnaean names. The long history of empirical investigation of

nature retold in “A”-22’s thousand lines is the flip side of the coin to *80 Flowers*’ polysemous garden, through which the reader ranges tracing manifold fractal lines of meaning. The experience of nature provides a minimal ground—a provisional Arcadian space—for the readers of both, in which these readers, like the poet himself, can play at being shepherds of meaning.

Zukofsky’s late ecolage is not Pound’s practice of fragments expansively arranged on the field of the page: it is implosive rather than explosive, with individual words tightly arranged so as to maximize the collage of contexts that Quartermain speaks of. It depends on a prosody of constraint grounded not in accentual-syllabic meter, but a line determined by word count (the five-word line of “A”-22, “A”-23, and *80 Flowers*), that helps to produce the late work’s characteristic “radical ambiguity of syntax” (*Louis Zukofsky* 234). Ambiguity of syntax inevitably produces a certain semantic ambiguity, but “A”-22, at any rate, never entirely loses contact with words and images evocative of the natural world. Barry Ahearn has written of “A”-22 that “The movement, as its interest in metamorphosis suggests, is concerned with one sort of meaning in particular—that which passes from nature through man into words” (189). So positioned, the human being does not master nature but pays a particular sort of attention to it, becoming a medium through which nature speaks. The intensely impacted stanzas of “A”-22 perform this metamorphosis again and again, foregrounding neither nature nor the human being, but the moment of emergent meaning—so that metamorphosis itself becomes the atmosphere or ambience in which the poem takes place:

AN ERA  
ANY TIME  
OF YEAR (A-22/508)

The opening epigram produces multiple hidden “ears,” or kinds of listening: the ear in “ERA,” the ear in “YEAR,” and the ear on the right margin of the lines: AER. These formations remind us of the essential temporality of listening: the eye may apprise a seemingly timeless space, but hearing can only happen in time and is the human sense most acutely aware of repetition and patterns in time—as in music. This may be, as Ahearn seems to suggest, an attempt to oppose or subvert abstract thinking with hearing: “Zukofsky has fashioned a rhythm that flows beautifully from one gemlike phrase to the next, an insidious music that puts the intellect to sleep. No matter how hard we try to stick to ‘thinking’ about these puzzling passages, the music eventually carries us away” (180). The opposition of hearing to music suggests Zukofsky’s preoccupation of what he saw as the three ages of civilization, which each in turn has its characteristic mode of language, as he said in London in 1969: “There is solid state, and there is liquid, and there is gas. It’s the same with the materials of poetry, you make images—that’s pretty solid—music, it’s liquid; ultimately, if something vaporizes, that’s the intellect” (“About the Gas Age,” P+ 169). Abstract discourse, for Zukofsky, is associated with the “gas age”—that is, modernity: “For Zukofsky, the gas age had begun by the time of Spinoza, with Shakespeare standing ‘just at the turning point’” (*Louis Zukofsky* 59). Zukofsky, on the other hand, yearns for the solid, and this yearning is the most direct expression of his pastoral impulse:

I’d like to keep solid because I can’t help myself, I was born in a gas age, but I don’t want to falsify my time so I get it down; it’s an attraction, but the older I get, oh I’d like to look at a leaf occasionally, and in the polluted city of New York with all the fumes and so on I really go out hunting for a crocus in an areaway. (P+ 170)

It’s important to note that Zukofsky’s pastoral yearning is not the naive variety: he does not wish to “falsify” his time by simply turning his back on a

modernity dominated by gaseous “intellecion.” Pastoral is an “attraction” or temptation that has increased as the poet has grown older, but it would be very un-Zukofskyan for him to yield to it entirely—to turn away from what he praised Reznikoff for fifty years earlier, that is, being a poet who “looked about him (in the boroughs of New York) and wrote verse which is definitely his own and thus *sincerely* contemporary” (“Sincerity and Objectification,” P+ 199). Yet as the 1969 interview suggests, age does seem to have brought about a certain shift in emphasis by the time of “A”-22. The stress on the image and thus on the solid is carried farthest in *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, where “By associating love with the unerring eye, Zukofsky in practice redefines love itself, removing it from the realm of the passions (which retain their Latin sense of ‘involuntary motions’) and setting it up as a principle of absolute certainty. Love is the access of the senses (the eyes) to the “simple” (single) nature’ whose loss Wittgenstein and Shakespeare both regret” (*Louis Zukofsky* 61-62). Nature is the “solid” directly apprehended by the eyes of love: this describes the purest possible vision of the Arcadian state, in which love and not labor is man’s means of mediating nature (what Stanley Cavell, quoted by Scroggins, calls “our old absorption in the world” [*Louis Zukofsky* 83]). This solid, “simple” nature received by the loving eye implies a purely spatial relation to the world, outside of time: “The fundamental principle of the love that is underwritten by ‘clear and distinct knowledge’—insofar as it is derived from Spinoza—is that its object is timeless, not subject to temporal change” (73). Once again there is the suggestion of a regressive pastoral—an Arcadian refuge separated not only from history, but from temporality itself, and from sociality as well (for human beings can only relate to each other in time): such would be the Marvellian “Two paradises it were in one / To live in paradise alone.” But the position taken by “A”-22 is more complex than this. By emphasizing hearing—the “liquid” state—at its opening, the movement takes an intermediary position between solid and

gas in the Zukofskyan schematic of the history of civilization. Hearing is moreover implicitly linked to modes of time—the historical and maximalist “ERA,” the more subjectively comprehensible “YEAR,” and the “ANY TIME” that expresses both dailiness and the synchronic collapse of time into a collage of moments: “ANY TIME / OF YEAR” an “ERA,” freighted with history, may suddenly arise, both contained within the smaller unit “YEAR” and exceeding it in significance. In “A”-22, time is not abolished in a pastoral of the solid, but the hearing ear conscious of rhythm and capable of mediating between ERA and ANY TIME suggests a more tenuous pastoral of the liquid—tenuousness itself being one of the principal markers of negative, ecologic pastoral.

The poem itself begins with an “account” that is both a narrative and a reckoning of how Arcadian space can emerge from a history “emptied of names / impertinence”:

Others letters a sum owed  
ages account years each year  
out of old fields, permute  
blow blue up against yellow  
—scapes welcome young birds—initial

transmutes itself, swim near and  
read a weed’s reward—grain  
an omen a good omen  
the chill mists greet woods  
ice, flowers—their soul’s return (A-22/508)

The syntactically ambiguous “Others letters a sum owed” tells us from the outset that the “sum” of this text, by which the letter or “initial // transmutes itself,” will be in large part derived from others’ writings, and suggests a relation of mutual dependence or “owing”: the others owe letters to Zukofsky, and/or he owes letters to them. Or as he puts it later in the movement:

A  
child learns on blank paper,  
an old man rewrites palimpsest,

a good heart dejected brings  
others peace, asks no returns,  
assumes milestones guide all and  
belong to each so no  
one people can claim to  
excel. (524-25)

To withhold names from history is not to withhold textuality—for where else can the discourse of history, even natural history, be found? The task of the “old man” is the re-use and re-deployment of others’ texts, writing a new kind of bricolagic or catachrestic history “out of old fields”: a citation from Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules* that echoes the line “Out of olde bokes, in good feith” used as an epigraph for *Poem Beginning “The.”* Zukofsky thus subtly insists on the unity of method employed between what we might call the *extensive* bricolage of “*The*” as opposed to the *intensive* bricolage of “A”-22, “A”-23, and *80 Flowers*. It also not incidentally suggests a continuity or parallelism between “bokes” and “fields.” that will render visible the modes of relation between people, facts, and events while removing the “impertinent” names that tend to conceal those relations. The ultimate goal is to write a history without centrism or hierarchy, “so no / one people can claim to / excel.” However, it is not merely the historical hierarchy of one people over another that Zukofsky wishes to question: the domination and suppression of nature by human beings is the major theme of “A”-22, mixed with tantalizing utopian hints of an ethical accommodation to nature based upon affinity for its objects. “Affinity” here is an Adornian concept, specifically distinguished from identity (the will to transform the Other into the Same associated by Critical Theory with instrumental reason and understanding or *Verstand*):

Without affinity there is no truth; this is what idealism caricatured in the philosophy of identity. Consciousness knows as much about its

otherness as it resembles that otherness...The less affinity to things [the subject] tolerates, the more ruthlessly will it identify. (ND 270)<sup>15</sup>

As opposed to the conceptual identification that masters the object and submits it to the subject's law, a move which, for Adorno, replicates the human domination of nature, affinity assumes "the object's preponderance," by which the subject comes to recognize the priority of the otherness of the object, even in himself: "An object can be conceived only by a subject but always remains something other than the subject, whereas a subject by its very nature is from the outset an object as well" (ND 183). This does not subordinate the subject to the object so much as it recognizes that whatever a subject is, it is also first itself an object: "Once man, the subject, knows the moment of his own equality with nature, he will desist from merely equalizing nature with himself" (ND 269). However, this does not mean that the subject has a direct, uncritical intuition of the object; to suggest that possibility would be to assert something akin to the naive pastoral of the solid that Zukofsky considers and rejects in "About the Gas Age" just as he rejects the necessity of myth in "Poetry/*For My Son When He Can Read.*" Such a move provides insufficient resistance to the dialectic of enlightenment and closes off possibilities for liberatory play. Adorno:

When we turn [affinity] into intuition, into a truth directly, sympathetically known, the dialectics of enlightenment will grind it to a bit as a relic, a warmed up myth that agrees with dominion, with the mythology that reproduces itself from pure reason. Affinity is not a remnant which cognition hands us after the identifying schemata of the

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<sup>15</sup> For this notion of affinity, and the quotations from *Negative Dialectics*, I am indebted to Chris Buck's unpublished essay "Experience First! Adorno and Radical Environmental Thought," York University, "Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: 2005 Anniversary Conference," [http://www.yorku.ca/cnsconf/b\\_ab.html](http://www.yorku.ca/cnsconf/b_ab.html), 12 April 2006.

categorical machinery have been eliminated. Rather, affinity is the definite negation of those schemata. (ND 270)

Affinity must, in Goethe's phrase, be elective: it only becomes possible when the subject is consciously and critically able to set aside what has been in Adorno's anthropology the historical relation between human beings and nature: a relation based on the will to self-preservation, which is insuperably connected to the will to dominate. Affinity is the prerequisite for the act of mimesis as Adorno defines it: "Mimesis, in other words, is the capacity to identify *with*, in sympathy and appreciation, rather than the ability to identify *as*, as is characteristic of instrumental logic.... Mimesis lets the object be. By so doing, mimetic capacity foreshadows the non-violative relationship to the other, beyond the heterogenous and beyond what is one's own, that can only be fulfilled in a redeemed world" (Cornell 23). Affinity and mimesis the pastoral state of "reconciliation" that Adorno only permits himself to glimpse in fragments: the fragmentary or constellary appearance of what in an early lecture Adorno called the "exact fantasy" demanded by a philosophy that would change the world is a direct index of its truth content ("The Actuality of Philosophy" 131). Only a fragmentary reconciliation provides the negative image of a real reconciliation between humans and their other, nature:

Things congeal as fragments off that which was subjugated; to rescue it means to love things. We cannot eliminate from the dialectics of the extant what is experienced in consciousness as an alien thing: negatively, coercion and heteronomy, but also the marred figure of what we should love, and what the spell, the endogamy of consciousness, does not permit us to love. The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the

proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogenous and beyond that which is one's own. (ND 191)

Loving things in proximity to the subject without demanding that they be identified with the subject: when we understand the primary “things” for Adorno to be the plants and animals and landscapes of nature, we recognize the Adornian pastoral. But Adorno's Arcadia, like Virgil's, is threatened even in the moment of its imagination by the violence of identity: Arcadian reconciliation is negated by Caesar's demobilized soldiers, who represent self-preservation and domination as a pervasive principle of human civilization, and the persistence of what Adorno calls “the identifying schemata of the categorical machinery” (ND 270) that closely resembles the “challenging” of nature that Heidegger identifies with technology (*Basic Writings* 320). The violence of the soldiers cannot be circumvented: they are as much a fact of the landscape as the woods that Tityrus seeks to “instruct” on the subject of love with his pipe. The relation of affinity requires both the withholding of instrumental *techne* and an acknowledgment of the damage *techne* has done: affinity recognizes the expressivity of nature, its “damaged life”:

Natural things are expressive when they speak of—that is, point or refer to—the domination and attendant suffering that they have undergone historically. One thinks of Adorno's statements that “the enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant” and that “progress does violence to the surface of the earth” (1944: 3/19; 1970a: 64/102). These statements hint that the superficial, perceptible features of nature have a ravaged, scarred character, which expresses the suffering inflicted upon nature by humanity. To experience natural beauty is to experience the surface features of nature as testifying to, and reminding us of, the

harm that we have done to nature over the course of history. (Stone  
245)

For Zukofsky, affinity is produced through intertextual play: only a full accounting of “Others letters” of natural history will enable us to “read” the natural landscape that “A”-22 unfolds into. The phrase “scapes welcome young birds” suggests that the transformation of a given natural space into a “scape” (landscape, seascape) by the poet’s eye—that is, through an aesthetic rather than cognitive or instrumental relation to nature—is what “welcomes” the birds, gifting them with metaphoricity; at the same time, it suggests that such aestheticization constitutes an (e)scape. The birds are now components in Zukofsky’s ecologic assemblage, which has the potential to liberate nature’s hidden legibility: “initial // transmutes itself, swim near and / read a weed’s reward” (A-22/508). Such a readers’ approach to nature can turn a weed into “grain” and grain into “an omen a good omen,” but what then to make of “the chill mists greet woods / ice, flowers—their soul’s return”? In part this is an assertion of circular, seasonal time over linear, historical time: after the “good omen” and harvest of grain come the chill mists and ice. If Zukofsky’s practice is also one of Adornian affinity, however, “their soul’s return” can be read as an emblem of the suffering that human beings have inflicted upon nature: the mists greet the woods with the chill of human coldness (“the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity” [ND 363]), and the ice that kills the flowers marks “their soul’s return” only negatively: the “soul” of nature is the memory of suffering, and the memory of a spontaneous nature that no longer exists. “[W]e know from nature’s ruined countenance that its spontaneous development has been constricted, but we could only know the character and extent of nature’s suffering if we knew what nature would be like if it (or its component phenomena) were to develop spontaneously” (Stone 246). The impacted

fragmentation of “A”-22 is mimetic of natural beauty, whose expressivity derives from woundedness:

For Adorno, modern artworks (more exactly, those works that realize the “concept” or essential tendency of modern art) do not naturalistically imitate literal natural phenomena but imitate natural beauty itself: that is, they do what natural things do in being beautiful, namely, express nature’s ungraspable suffering. “The pure expression of artworks ... converges with nature . . . eloquent nature, its language” (1970a: 78/121). To achieve this expressiveness, an artwork must imbue the particular materials (*Stoffe*) that compose it with reference to a suffering that can only be sensed. These materials, Adorno stresses, are not simple givens but pre-formed elements such as musical notes or phrases, yet their role within the work is that of being multiple particulars which the work orders. The role of these materials within the work makes them analogous to the particular natural things that humanity controls. Consequently, if, within an artwork, these materials convey their suffering, then that work indirectly voices the analogous suffering of particular natural things. (Stone 247)

Emblems of nature’s suffering through images of coldness recur throughout “A”-22: “fireless cold tamed geese barren— / jackal, coyote ravished earth—separated” (514); “White snow, white feather, white / horse, is man white felling / hills for fuel” (519); “In the flagrate of cold / theatre of the world the / wren and hindsight nest” (530). Cold in the poem becomes a figure for negativity, through which we recognize nature itself as a utopian not-yet: “Three days rain / and the cold thank god / Who persists saying *no*, nature” (526-27, italics in original).

Zukofsky's expressive nature always includes human nature, which is why he permits his images of reconciliation to come closer to realization than Adorno's.

Having in the first two stanzas intimated his palimpsestic and fragmentary technique for making nature legible, Zukofsky imagines the pastoral reconciliation such legibility might make possible:

let me live here ever,  
sweet now, silence foison to  
on top of the weather  
it has said it before  
why that was you that

is how you weather division  
a peacocks grammer perching—and  
perhaps think that they see  
or they fly thru a  
window not knowing it there (A-22/508)

The expressive power of a nature whose “initial // transmutes itself” is answered by Ferdinand's cry of wonder at the pastoral masque conjured by Prospero in Act 4, Scene 1 of *The Tempest*. While Zukofsky does not include them, the memory of the lines that follow (“So rare a wonder'd father and a wife / Makes this place paradise”) suggest the role that human and specifically familial relationships play in transforming natural “scapes” into “paradise” (Zukofsky here may be thinking of his own roles as father of Paul and husband to Celia). But these lines are omitted in favor of Prospero's gentle command calling for silence: “hush, and be mute, / Or else our spell is marr'd.” Silence here is “foison to / on top of the weather”: in the play it first appears in a speech of the goddess Ceres, in which she chants, “Earth's increase, foison plenty, / Barns and garners never empty.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* “foison” is a verb meaning “to supply plentifully” or “to nourish,” but it is also a noun referring specifically to a “plentiful crop or harvest” and refers in Scottish dialect to “Inherent vigour or vitality; power, strength, capacity.” Silence is a negative quality referring to the absence of sound; Zukofsky's “foison” transforms that negativity into a plenitude

which, when superadded to nature as given (“on top of the weather”) enables nature’s expression. The odd pronoun shift in the following lines suggests both the continual nature of nature’s address (“it has said it before”—which also recalls the palimpsestic demand for rewriting in the first line, “Others letters a sum owed”) and the blurred boundary between human and nature, subject and object, required if one is to speak out of affinity: “why that was you that // is how you weather division / a peacocks grammer perching.” To “weather division” would achieve the state of reconciliation that Adorno provides a rare, tantalizing glimpse of in his essay “Subject and Object”:

In its proper place, even epistemologically, the relationship of subject and object would lie in a peace achieved between human beings as well as between them and their Other. Peace is the state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other.

(500)

Differentiation without domination is captured by Zukofsky in the striking image of “a peacocks grammar perching”: the peacock lends its dazzling plumage and perch to “grammar,” to language’s capacity for differentiation when it is informed by—when it imitates—natural beauty. But Zukofsky does not linger here—the dash after “perching” takes us into lines speculating about the reality or lack thereof of windows to the birds—of which the peacock is the king—that have been welcomed to “A”-22’s “scapes.” A window is an opening between the natural world and a human habitation, a means of perception; but it is also representative of *Gestell*, what Heidegger calls “enframing”—the mode of revealing characteristic of modern technology that “challenges” natural objects to become “standing reserve” (*Basic Writings* \_\_). As such, it acts as a barrier and mortal danger to birds. Zukofsky makes the violence of the relation between human beings and nature implied by that enframing window explicit, even as he suggests another mode of relation to nature:

the window could they sing  
it broken need not bleed  
one proof of its strength  
a need birds cannot feign  
persisting for flight as when

they began to exist—error  
if error vertigo their sun  
eyes delirium—both initial together  
rove into the blue initial  
surely it carves a breath (A-22/508-509)

Could the birds “sing it broken” they “need not bleed”: song, the upper limit of poetry, is here made coextensive with birdsong, the expressivity of natural beauty that is damaged by the enframing human window. Song does not as a general rule break windows, and this is “one proof of [the window’s] strength”; yet the “weakness” of song, its refusal of the grasping power of identity, is precisely what differentiates it as a mode of relation from the modes associated with modern technology (Heidegger) and instrumental cognition (Adorno). The persistence of differentiation outside the identifying “window” is “a need birds cannot feign / persisting for flight as when // they began to exist.” The admittedly ambiguous syntax of the first stanza seems to make song the prerequisite for flight (the two are united in the word *fugue*, which derives from the Italian *fuga*, flight): both song and flight require air and are assumed together in the “breath” of the second stanza: “both initial together / rove into the blue initial / surely it carves a breath.” The “initial” of this poetry—which withholds proper names, and which seeks to recover the power of creation or “initiation” for words and letters—seeks to “rove” (one is tempted to paraphrase, “essay”) “into the blue initial” that recalls the sky, lid of the natural world, and more dimly the Mallarmean “azure.” Language here, as in the opening stanza off “A”-22, is meant to “permute // blow blue up against yellow”: this is captured literally in the blue and yellow design of a 1970 poetry postcard featuring the “AN ERA” epigraph (Leggott 38-39), but within the context of the poem this signals that the permutations of “Others letters” will “blow”

(a word that combines breathing with blooming) “blue up against yellow”—language becoming a second blooming of the sun and sky, the horizon of the world that is also the horizon of Zukofsky’s natural history. Otherwise we are left with the “error” of the birds that “fly thru a / window not knowing it there,” disoriented by the “eyes delirium” caused by the enframing window that doubles the world (“vertigo their sun”) and destroys the nonidentical. Their hazardous flight is dependent on a song that cannot in fact “sing / [the window] broken” and that song, in Zukofsky’s poem, becomes expressive of the pain inflicted by enframing. Yet these lines, rather typically for the chiasmically structured “A”-22 and “A”-23, also contain their own mirror meaning as an emblem for Zukofsky’s own technique of intensive and impacted collage, which might well lead readers into “error / if error,” which essentially relies on errancy to achieve its effects. Here Zukofsky registers the disorientation his readers encounter in the face of such a poetry, while suggesting that this vertigo might actually inculcate a new point of orientation, “their sun” which stuns the eyes into “delirium.” At the same time he recognizes the danger of obfuscation: a poet who conflates eyes with the I, and who wrote an epic work of criticism (*Bottom: On Shakespeare*) that sought to reduce the complete works of Shakespeare to the equation *sight = love = knowledge*, must be wary of the possibility that his own technique of writing might produce the equivalent of “eyes delirium.” This is the price of Zukofskyan intensive collage, with its seeming refusal of all determination save the minimal one of form. But we cannot lose sight of the continual assertion of nature in “A”-22 as, in Barrett Watten’s phrase, one of Zukofsky’s “horizons of liberation.” The difficulty of the writing derives from its imitation of the expressiveness of natural beauty; as Stone writes, “To achieve this expressiveness, an artwork must imbue the particular materials (*Stoffe*) that compose it with reference to a suffering that can only be sensed” (247). The letteral *Stoffe* of “A”-22 gestures back toward the suffering of nature

(nature as created by technological man) and forward to the imagining of nature unimpeded (nature as creator). In its intense ambivalence, the poem multiplies difference and offers a glimpse of the nonidentical:

one air then a host  
an air not my own  
an earth of three trees  
sleep revives—night adds hours  
awake to augur days impend

the trumpet ice edges shrill,  
twigged heart flounce the Land  
be not fought—greatness remain  
what avails the life to  
leaf to flower to fruit (A-22/509)

The “breath” carved by the “blue initial” of language-nature-language multiplies the air—“one air then a host”—while the very word of multiplication, “host,” also imagines the hospitality of difference, and the ability to persist in nonidentity, to live in “an air not my own.” For Zukofsky, Arcadian space is precisely that “carved” out from the strategized territorializations of identity-thinking: “an air not my own / an earth of three trees” (with the nature of these “trees” left indeterminate: the trees of Eden? the crosses at Golgotha? simply three trees in Zukofsky’s yard at Port Jefferson, New York?) is the groundless ground of his ecolage. The lines “sleep revives—night adds hours / awake” suggest insomnia, but they might also refer to dreams, which can have the utopian function of “add[ing] hours / awake to augur days impend.” As Woods points out, *augury* means “the Roman practice of prediction based on reading the omens derived from the flight, singing, and feeding of birds and the reading of celestial patterns, both of which Zukofsky does at this point in the Movement” (196). (Perhaps the insomniac gazes at the stars and constellations, and reads another “initial” there.) This act of foretelling refers back to “an omen a good omen” (A-22/508) but also suggests the utopian possibilities that Zukofskyan ecolage is meant to unlock: “days impend” may be read

as “the day’s impend” (the day that follows the night), but also has a grander meaning of “days to come,” a reading enhanced by the literal definition of *impend* as “to jut out; hang suspended.” The utopian pastoral day already has a partial existence, jutting out as it does from the dark night of capitalist modernity. The dialectical embeddedness of the nature to come in the ruins of nature is reinforced in the following stanza by “the trumpet ice edges shrill”—the “chill” and “ice” from the second stanza of “A”-22 that mark the suffering of nature return explicitly in the form of a “trumpet” that announces the “edges shrill” between the two states of nature that Zukofskyan pastoral makes visible. A “twigged heart” suggests both an image of the heart as tree (and retroactively converts “an earth of three trees” to an earth of three human hearts, three shepherds: Louis, Celia, and Paul) and the negative dialectics of the heart that Zukofsky is trying to cultivate, always “twigging” in at least two directions so as to “flounce the Land” with “Land” here standing for nature as territorialized totality.<sup>16</sup> “Flounce” sounds quite a bit like “flout,” but according to the *American Heritage Dictionary* it means “A strip of decorative, usually gathered or pleated material attached by one edge, as on a garment or curtain.” As such, Zukofsky’s “twigged heart”—a heart self-identified with the readiest emblem of the natural world, a tree—gathers or attaches a liminal, “pleated” Arcadian space to the self-reifying totality of “the Land.” That such a stance implicitly rejects violence is suggested by “be not fought”—the Land should neither be fought (as representative of the instrumental, territorializing will to self-preservation) nor fought *for*; instead “greatness remain[s]” with the creative force of nature, “what avails the life to / leaf to

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<sup>16</sup> There is also a more specifically political interpretation of this line: “the Land” may refer to the Land of Israel, which Zukofsky as ambivalent or possibly anti-Zionist may wish to “flounce,” preferring the negative dialectics of diaspora to the seizure and holding of territory.

flower to fruit.” The following lines identify this force with cyclical time, distinguishing it from the time of events or history:

the season’s colors a ripening  
work their detail—the perennial  
invariance won’t hollow it, no  
averaging makes their tones—Paradise  
the swept brain blood warmer

leaving it eyes’ heat stars’  
dawn mirror to west window  
binds the sun’s east—steersman’s  
one guess at certainty made  
with an assemblage of naught— (A-22/509)

The passing of the seasons brings a ripening, work a “detail,” that will not be “hollowed” by either the “perennial invariance” of history nor the “averaging” of exchange-value and identity thinking. “Paradise” inheres in the cyclical time of natural history, just as by implication it is contained on the micro level within the human body’s circulation of blood: “Paradise / the swept brain blood warmer / leaving it.” That invocation of the brain shows Zukofsky’s respect for thought that is not of the “averaging” variety, and is suggestive of the Spinozan continuity of spirit and matter that Zukofsky celebrates in “A”-9: “Elysium exchanges / No desires; its thought loves what hope estranges,” and “Substance subjected to no human prevision, / Free as exists it loves” (109); in these lines it is the matter of the body, set free from “human prevision” and “hope [that] estranges” that exists in love and so in Elysium. In “A”-22 the heat of the blood passing through the brain also heats the eyes, marking the Zukofskyan distinction between calculated “prevision” and the physical eye’s ability to apprehend and love in the same action. The “stars’ / dawn [are] mirror” to the “west window”—another enframing window that “binds the sun’s east”—but the “stars’ /

dawn mirror” the “eyes’ heat” as well.<sup>17</sup> Truth, or even one’s basic orientation, is at best ambiguously available when enframing is discarded: “steersman’s / one guess at certainty made / with an assemblage of naught.” But that is Zukofsky’s wager, knowing as he does that as “fish purl in the weir: / we are caught by our / own knowing” (A-22/510), so “Paradise” depends on free circulation, in which inheres an experience of time snatched from the eddies of historical experience:

sink killick read the kelp

cherries, knave of a valentine  
were ever blue of yellow,  
birds, harp in three trees—  
now summer happy new year  
any time of year—so

no piper lead with nonsense  
before its music don’t, horse,  
brag of faith too much—  
fear thawed reach three-fingered chord  
sweet treble hold lovely—initial (A-22/510-11)

By sinking a “killick” (a small and so perhaps provisional anchor) in the moment and “read[ing] the kelp” (harkening back to the command “swim near and / read a weed’s reward”), Zukofsky conjures a domestic Arcadia: “knave of a valentine” refers to his son Paul Zukofsky (particularly the valentine-in-a-heart of “A”-12 [129]), the phrasing of “were ever” recalls Ferdinand’s cry, “Let me live here ever,” and the family unit is again described as “three trees” inhabited by birds-as-harp, birds whose song now no longer only expresses suffering but forecasts reconciliation, conveying an experience of paradise “now summer happy new year / any time of year.” Yet this experience is necessarily transient, the flash of the dialectical sublation of the past by the future; Zukofsky is wary of the trap of “the myth of cyclical time” that entangled

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<sup>17</sup> Given the moral authority that Zukofsky assigns to physical sight, there is perhaps an allusion here to Kant’s famous remark, “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe—the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.”

his mentor Pound in Pound's pre-Pisan pastoral—a myth that, as both Robert Cassillo and Theodor Adorno might observe, serves to conceal and “naturalize” the violence done to human and external nature. Zukofsky will not even go as far as the later Pound's claim “Let the wind speak / that is paradise”; instead he invokes the precariousness of the pastoral poet's situation and the danger that he too might try to dominate or “lead with nonsense” rather than letting “music” speak: using his favorite image to address himself, he admonishes “don't, horse, / brag of faith too much.” “Music,” not the poet-horse-piper, must be the agent of pastoral reconciliation by which “fear thawed reach three-fingered chord”—“thawed” referring again back to the human enframing and challenging that has frozen nature. Zukofskyan pastoral demands a radical passivity on the part of the poet, by which language and nature become expressive of and legible in one another: “sweet treble hold lovely—initial.” Thus ends the “prologue” of “A”-22: the five-line stanzas are replaced by continuous lines for twenty-three pages in which Zukofsky unfolds his palimpsestic and letteral natural history positioned to oppose a history of names and images:

voiced, once unheard  
 earth beginning idola of years  
 that love well forget late.  
 History's best emptied of names'  
 impertinence met on the ways:  
 show then the little earth  
 at regard of the heavens  
 unfolding tract and flying congregate  
 birds their hiding valentine's day (A-22/511)

The history of enframing, which is also a history that enframes (written as Zukofsky says later in the poem by “Scribes” who “conceive history as tho / sky, sun, men never were” [522]), produces “idola” or false images of years that the perceptual present-tense “love” of Zukofsky's pastoral seeks to forget. The lines “show then the little earth / at regard of the heavens” are ambiguous: a quotation from Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules* (Leggott 53), they suggest that Zukofsky's nameless mode of

history would show the earth and its life from a lofty, even transcendental distance. But in Chaucer's poem they precede the speaker's vision of the Valentine's Day parliament of birds, in which all the birds of the world are called together before the goddess Nature in her garden to choose their mates, or have them chosen for them: "Ye come for to chese—and flee your way— / Your makes, as I prik yow with plesaunce"). Chaucer's lines blur the location of love's agency: with a doubleness that surely pleased Zukofsky, Chaucer suggests a dialectical relation between the lover-subject and Nature-object, with neither having dominion over the love that they contain and which contains them. Love therefore takes on greater objectivity as that which exceeds both lover and nature, and becomes a means of mediation between them: the poet's task of "augury," the reading of the movements of birds, becomes a reading of this flickering movement between subject and object. The poem continues:

little horse can you speak  
 won't know till it speaks:  
 three birches in the meadow  
 kiss: constant please. (A-22/511)

The reiteration of "little" in "little horse" harkens back four lines to the "little earth" and suggests that the earth is not being belittled or reduced by the transcendent perspective of natural history so much as it is being treated affectionately (we recall that Zukofsky wrote a novel about and for his son titled *Little: for Careenagers*). The poet as "little horse" does not "speak" "till it speaks"; in context, the "it" must be the love that is objective in several senses (it is an object or has a material basis; it provides a distanced viewpoint) but as that which transforms objects into *beloved* objects is that through which subjectivity recognizes itself; and so the family Zukofsky become "three birches in the meadow / kiss: constant please." Constantly pleased and pleasing, the love shown by and in the family unit produces their continuity with the natural world they are assimilated to as "birches in the meadow." The natural history of "A"-22 is at least in part then a history of this affection.

The poet as part of nature, as “little horse,” returns in the last ninety-seven lines of the movement, where the five-line stanza reappears and the poet again unfolds the ambiguous Arcadian space-time (“old in / a greenhouse”) of his writing:

old in  
a greenhouse the stabled horse  
sings sometimes, thoughts’ template  
somehow furthers a cento reading:

oval stairs, diminished steps, wings  
either side .. in my mind  
a dream of named history  
contént with *still-vext Bermoothes* .. *where*  
*once thou call’dst me up*

.. *to fetch dew* .. tears: *there*  
*she’s hid* an arm embraces. (A-22/535, italics in original)

With “cento” referring both to a patchwork composition and to the *Century* dictionary that Zukofsky favored, “a cento reading” summarizes both Zukofsky’s compositional technique and what’s demanded of the readers of a text that, unlike the poet himself, can never be fully “stabled.” Zukofsky’s collage verges on ecolage when he permits himself “a dream of named history,” that is, history redeemed and reconciled—but for now we must be “contént” with the spell of Ariel, whose magical capture of King Alonso’s ship will make possible the temporary pastoral refuge from the violence of history that by play’s end will bring about a political and historical redemption through by reconciling Prospero with his usurping brother Antonio. At the same time the “Bermoothes” are “still-vext” and the “dew” fetched from that enameled green paradise are like the “tears” of injured nature; “an arm embraces” at movement’s end, signifying compassion but also the radical receptivity required by an ecolage through which “Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody” (P+ 194).



reinforced by the return of Zukofsky's structural image for the artwork, the flower. One of the ambiguities of the use of this structural metaphor in the text is whether the layering of leaves around some central node corresponds to the artist or to the textual production. In either configuration, the stress is laid on the passivity of the creative process and on the fact that the creator is as much part of the creative process as the product itself. In a dialectical relationship, the work makes the artist just as the artist makes the work. (84-85)

Woods goes on to make a key connection between modernist collage, as exemplified in the Adornian figure of the "constellation," and the Zukofskyan "flower":

In the structural metaphor of the "constellation," elements operate as individual objects in a more complex whole. The part-and-whole structure of Adorno's astral metaphor resembles the part-and-whole structure of Zukofsky's structural metaphor of the flower. Each object in the constellation is "flung for the other" (A-2/7) as well as appearing as an objective entity itself. Similarly, each leaf is a discrete item yet constructed as the partial support of a greater structure, although it never loses its discretion within the floral structure. (91)

Zukofsky's guiding analogy of the flower-as-poem and the poem-as-flower suggests an attitude toward the making of poetry closer to the letting-be of *physis* than the active manipulation of *techne*. Not just the poem, but individual words and letters "flower" with multiple meanings, with a "strength of suggestion" that imitates the expressive quality of natural beauty:

Good verse is determined by the poet's susceptibilities involving a precise awareness of differences, forms and possibilities of existence—words with their own attractions included. The poet, no less than the

scientist, works on the assumption that inert and live things and relations hold enough interest to keep him alive as part of nature. The fact that he persists with them confirms him. When human beings “vegetate” their existence covers at least an *eosere* for him. For if poetry can ever be contented it will be content only through a specialized sense for every unfolding. But poets measure by means of words, whose effect as offshoot of nature may (or should) be that their strength of suggestion can never be accounted for completely. (P+ 7)

When human beings permit themselves to “vegetate” (a verb that in Zukofsky’s sentence carries more than a whiff of the transitive) “their existence” registers as an *eosere* or dawning for the *ecoleur* that “persists” with “inert and live things and relations.” Zukofsky’s stance here parallels and extends that of Adorno’s call for the “preponderance of the object” when he states that these “things” “hold enough interest to keep him alive as part of nature.” It is the poet’s interest in the nonidentical, his “precise awareness of differences, forms and possibilities of existence” that keeps him “alive” *as* poet, and not just any kind of poet but a dialectical *ecoleur* who recognizes that poetry will never be “content” save “through a specialized sense for every unfolding.” The objectification of “perfect rest” can never be achieved by the *ecoleur*, only striven for through the continuous “unfolding” of “inert and live things and relations.” The perfect “rested totality” of an Objectivist poetics “distinct from print which records action and existence and incites the mind to further suggestion” (P+ 194) becomes a figure in Zukfoskian *ecolage* for the reconciliation between human beings and nature that cannot be fully represented, only glimpsed and foretold as an *eosere* through persisting with intensively collaged words, “offshoot[s] of nature” whose “strength of suggestion can never be accounted

for completely” just as what natural beauty seems to express can never be fully accounted for.

For Adorno, the expressiveness of natural beauty only gestures indeterminately backward at the history of suffering human beings have inflicted upon it: he “argues that direct experience of natural beauty is (like the typical form of re-enchantment) problematic: this experience implies that nature can still express and realize itself in modern society, concealing the extent of nature’s domination. This critique of natural beauty suggests that when, in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno argues that natural beauty should be experienced only indirectly via artworks, he is finding embodied in artworks a special kind of thinking which manages to re-enchant nature while remaining critical of its domination. If so, then artworks embody the same kind of thought as constellations.” (Stone 244). For Adorno, undialectical images of a reconciled nature can only deceive, ultimately serving to support the existing order of domination (recalling Leo Marx’s critique of a sentimental pastoral “generated by an urge to withdraw from civilization’s growing power and complexity” [9]). But such images are also literally unimaginable insofar as nature—spontaneous nature, Spinoza’s *natura naturans*—has, for Adorno, never yet come to exist:

According to Marcuse, when we see “human misery and suffering,” we know that humans must by nature have capacities which they cannot realize in current society—but we cannot know exactly what these capacities are, since there is no positive evidence of them beyond the fact of human suffering (Marcuse, 1968: 69, 72–3). To apply this argument to nature: we know from nature’s ruined countenance that its spontaneous development has been constricted, but we could only know the character and extent of nature’s suffering if we knew what nature would be like if it (or its component phenomena) were to

develop spontaneously. We could then use nature's spontaneous mode of development as a yardstick against which to measure how much, and in what ways, our activities have constricted and harmed it. Yet nature has been so thoroughly dominated historically that we lack access to any spontaneously developing nature. *Aesthetic Theory* thus presupposes that we cannot grasp from nature's exterior exactly how and in what respects it has been deformed, but can only gain an indeterminate awareness that it has undergone a history of deformation. (Stone 246)<sup>18</sup>

Attempts to depict "spontaneously developing nature" can only be ideological in Adorno's view. Yet the mimesis of such spontaneity is precisely what Zukofsky discovers in a natural world approached through an intensively collaged language of homonyms, chiasmic syntax, and fragmentary citations from others' texts and his own; at the same time, such language serves as a kind of archive or memory bank of the history of nature's domination, as "consecutively fossiliferous / marl saved froghopper, ladybird, glowworm, / red admiral, mingling in dredged / lake mud" (A-22/513). Such language demands a spontaneous attitude from the reader, who must be willing to follow each word, phrase, and line in multiple, endlessly branching directions. While "A"-22 provides something of a narrative through line through the device of natural history, Zukofsky's final completed text, *80 Flowers*, goes the farthest toward creating a textual garden that simulates natural beauty's "purposiveness without purpose" so as to suggest that the paradoxical purpose of the

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<sup>18</sup> In Adorno, there is an implicit connection between the nature that does not yet exist and the human being as empirical subject: both have been suppressed and deformed by the relation of exchange: "If the exchange form is the standard social structure, its rationality constitutes people; what they are for themselves, what they seem to be for themselves, is secondary. They are deformed beforehand by the mechanism that has been philosophically transfigured as transcendental. The supposedly most evident of things, the empirical subject, would really have to be viewed as not yet in existence; in this perspective, the transcendental subject is 'constitutive'" ("Subject and Object" 501).

aesthetic experience of indeterminate poem-flowers is the thinking of nature as pastoral “horizon of liberation.” What strikes the casual reader as the “deformed” language of *80 Flowers* functions in part as the “yardstick” by which we can measure the damage done to our spontaneity by systems of domination, while that same language provides the persistent reader with the oddly exhilarating experience of “vegetating” within language’s capacity for creating an Arcadian sphere of “differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other” (“Subject and Object” 500). Consider “Dandelion”:

No blanch witloof handbound dry  
heart to racks a comb  
lion's-teeth thistlehead *golden-hair earth nail*  
flower-clock *up-by-pace* dandle lion won't  
dwarf lamb closes night season  
its long year *dumble-dor* bumbles  
cure wine *blowball* black fall's-berry  
madding sun mixen seeded rebus (CSP 340)

Zukofsky’s flower inscribes itself on our nerves with a language that manages to be precise and unfamiliar at the same time. Before it sends us to the dictionary after the meaning of words like “witloof” (an endive), “dumble-dor” (a bumblebee), and “mixen” (a compost heap or dungpile), “Dandelion” makes a sound, echoing with traces of meaning unpacked from the image of the flower joined with its name. This “Dandelion” is a “seeded rebus”: a puzzle in which pictures and symbols are used to make up a word, and Zukofsky’s poem wants its words to strike you as immediately as pictures do, and to appear as complete; as Zukofsky writes in “For Wallace Stevens,” “I’m not lush about things—I try not to read into things, I try to *read*, which means that if the page doesn’t have it any imagination on my part as to what I might read into it has no significance.... This activity is a kind of mathematics but more sensuous, and it has little to do with learning, it has something to do with structure” (P+ 24). Such a poetics radically extends the conflation of word with natural object suggested by

Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*—the poet who further insisted that “This is no book / Who touches this touches a man.” Language matters because language *is* matter: for Zukofsky, language is one face of the Spinozan divine substance from which all being derives. If language is a picture that holds us captive, as Wittgenstein suggests, Zukofsky's sequence at least refracts that picture so that it appears to us as it might through a bee's multifaceted eyes, exploding possibilities for pollination. And it insists on the openness of the field of language through the direct mimesis of the mode of appearance of natural beauty. As Kent Johnson has written:

The insistent deferral of imagistic rest from “A”-22 on foregrounds each sign's embeddedness in an open field of relations (as any occasion of nature is so embedded); each particular—each chord—both infused by and charging context, creating, to quote Mutlu Knouk Blasing (herself quoting Hugh Kenner), “a universe of ‘patterned integrities’ [that] work above or below the horizontal grid on which mere analogies are plotted” (147). (Johnson 261, brackets in original)

The poems of *80 Flowers* are a garden of indeterminacy, but that does not mean they stand for the pure anarchic play of the signifier. They represent a form of life lived according to the mimetic principle, which relaxes the grip of the *ratio* and lets objects be things, be other, radiant with their immanent manifold meanings as both flowers and words. This accommodation or glimpse of reconciliation between human beings and nature marks the work as pastoral, sometimes overtly as in “Yaupon”:

Children nurs'd woods tilled rock  
 red totem dances blacks drink  
 under eyes threshold index thunder  
*Yaupon* flower-scurried buds eyes glance  
 magnified throb aye lex foam't  
 horse a full bolus leaf-wave-edged  
 evergreen prove if berries hardy-bred  
 ‘junivals’ gulp'm tiger-numb current-red (351, italics in original)

The children here are associated with both a “red totem” (which may also represent the berry of this evergreen holly plant) and dancing “blacks,” suggesting that Zukofsky is playing with the notion of the indigenous (yaupon is native to the southeastern United States), particularly Rousseau’s idea of the noble savage. But the “blacks” here are not necessarily just a racist cartoon of African Americans. The “blacks,” who are possibly the direct object of a transitive “dances,” “drink / under eyes threshold index.” Might they not be letters on a page, under both the eyes of the reader and the eyes/I’s that threaten to impose a transcendental “threshold” of meaning on their “dances”?<sup>19</sup> The “index” or gesture of such a reading is perhaps countered by the “thunder” of the flower’s name in all its numinous indeterminacy (it is a Catawba word; the Catawba are a tribe of American Indians who once lived along the Catawba River in the Carolinas). The eyes then “glance,” distracted maybe by the “magnified throb aye lex foam’t”—a marvelous encapsulation of the uncanny and excessive (“foam’t”) life of language (“lex”) which transforms the gaze of the I/eye into an affirmative “aye.” There is, in short, enough referential evidence to suggest that these poems represent the ethos of pastoral, even as they acknowledge, as good pastoral generally does, the fragility of any garden of thingly mimesis set aside from the scrutinizing instrumental discourse of an egoistic “I.”

Zukofsky’s stubbornly linguistic imagination, which as Objectivist reverts always to Adorno’s insistence on “the preponderance of the object,” suggests an

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<sup>19</sup> In connection with this, Ming-Qian Ma has written of Charles Rakosi’s affinities with Adorno in his suspicion of the epistemological point of view represented by the “eye/I”: “To a great extent, Rakosi’s poems such as ‘The Romantic Eye’ and ‘Man Contemplating a Rock’ exhibit the poets remarkable understanding of methodology as a tautological construct, as a closed system, with preordained outcomes; and, viewed in this light, they present themselves as powerful and convincing examples or demonstrations supporting Adorno’s theorem that ‘Methodologically, . . . epistemology presupposes what, by its proper *raison d’être* it should have deduced’ (*Against Epistemology* 171). This shared realization of the ‘eye/I’ as living, walking methodology leads, then, to the shared interests in as well as efforts to search for the alternative, an alternative that describes, rather than renders, an object.” “Be Aware of ‘the Medusa’s Glance’: The Objectivist Lens and Carl Rakosi’s poetics of Strabismal Seeing.” *The Objectivist Nexus*, 82.

ecology for words: a desire to present them, if not in their natural habitat, then at least with their history intact: their roots, their flowers and seeds, all visible. It is this sense of history, even written without names' impertinence, that grounds Zukofsky's late work, and informs the sensitivity to nature that helps us to recognize *80 Flowers* as a pastoral. Mark Scroggins uses Derrida's notion of "the graft" to describe how Zukofsky's poetics proliferates contexts and connotations while making it impossible to strategize a single "supercontext" that would enclose every meaning of the poem or its components:

Zukofsky's poetics of collage, as practiced in both "*A*" and *Bottom*, plays out in a strikingly foregrounded manner the properties of language and context that Derrida, in his "Signature Event Context," describes as the poetics of the "graft": "by virtue of its essential iterability, a written syntagm can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning, if not all possibility of 'communicating,' precisely. One can perhaps come to recognize other possibilities in it by inscribing it or *grafting* it onto other chains. No context can entirely enclose it" (*Limited Inc* 9). (*Louis Zukofsky* 90)

The idea of Zukofskyan ecolage as "grafting" has of course interesting implications for a poetics that, in *80 Flowers*, asks to be conflated with the practice of botany; at the very least, it reminds us of the history that each "flower" (both linguistic and literal) contains within it as the product of innumerable grafts and transplants through the centuries. For Michele Leggott, such a poetics demands that readers go to the mulch and compost out of which the sequence was composed; she claims that the sheer difficulty of the late work required Zukofsky "to legitimize use of the draft material by housing it in a public collection" (32), the Harry Ransom Humanities

Research Center at the University of Texas. While most critics have since rejected the idea that Zukofsky intended each of his readers to make the trip to Austin, Leggott's focus on the "draft material" of *80 Flowers* does serve to remind us that a keen awareness of Zukofsky's palimpsestic tactics is probably necessary for the enjoyment of the poem; though we need not hunt down every reference, the sequence's referentiality is the climate in which these poems must be received. As Scroggins puts it, "In Zukofsky's later works, one must take quotation or borrowing as a continual given: the very texture of the verse is a tissue of quotations, translations, and transliterations, only a minimal proportion of which are acknowledged as such through quotation marks or italics" (*Louis Zukofsky* 234). Zukofsky as *ecoleur* explodes each flower into a constellation of literary, botanical, and biographical elements, contained at best provisionally by the narrative implicit in the title (the poems intended as the "flowering" of Zukofsky's eightieth year, and the implicit "afterlife" to his "poem of a life," "A"). The weakness of this narrative as a container for the sequence suggests Zukofsky's continuing desire, as *ecoleur*, to subvert even his own strategic gestures in favor of a tactical and provisional approach to writing: the "garden" of *80 Flowers* is never its "own" place, a fertile inversion of Eliot's *Waste Land*. Instead, it dialectically hesitates on a syntactic level, never allowing a given word or phrase to solidify into an image that would bring about the false reconciliation of subject and object, signifier and signified. *80 Flowers* requires the reader to return again and again to the surface of the text, not to any single communication but to communicativity as such. The text becomes a limit case of Timothy Morton's "ambient poetics," in which "the medium in which communication takes place becomes the message that is communicated" and that message "is the conjuration of the world in language, a world that hesitates between subject and object" ("Twinkle" ¶31). That hesitation, embedded both in the poems' syntax and in their proliferation of contexts (which becomes equivalent, as

Bruce Comens notes, to “the removal of context, for it is context that limits meaning and thereby determines it” [quoted in *Louis Zukofsky* 234]) produces the negative dialectics of Zukofsky’s pastoral, refusing the image of reconciled nature (the “insistent deferral of imagistic rest” Johnson writes of) while attempting to enact Adorno’s demand for “the recovery of a playful innocence achieved through the reconnection with the Other in oneself”; otherwise, “one cannot become a human being capable of nonviolative relations to the Other” (Cornell 14). The communicativity of ambient poetics is meant to stimulate an awareness of “communicative freedom” between self and Other—both the Other-as-nature and the self-as-nature (which is of course equivalent to “the Other in oneself”):

The awareness that the self-conscious subject comes home in and through the relationship to otherness is what Michael Theneuissen has called “communicative freedom.” Communicative freedom is the truth of the belonging together of the relata. Communicative freedom, in other words, is the *coincidence* of love and freedom in which “one part experiences the other not as boundary but as the condition for its own realization.” (Cornell 15)

For Adorno, of course, “the whole is the false,” and an enforced totality that erased the separation between subject and object would be tyranny: “communicative freedom cannot be thought of as the unification of the relata into a comprehensive totality without violating the coincidence of love and freedom” (Cornell 15). *Coincidence*, with all the fragility and weakness that the word implies, is the precondition for a constructivist pastoral that would be the index of reconciliation; any stronger mimetic or narrative mode would be at best premature and at worst a

falsifying and ideological totalization.<sup>20</sup> So does the correspondence between signifier and signified operate in *80 Flowers* at a level no stronger than coincidence: one can read any word group or lines from the sequence both forward and back, inward and outward:

Hillocky *alpine rosy bells* name  
mountains earth heaps bulbs flowering  
first bud brown turn rosy  
upturned limbed cups pygmies silvery  
anthers black to clouds dutch-art  
amiss aspire least pink lightpierced  
papery barber poles vanish discords  
swallows uptrilled-thundershower horses slope from (“Alpine Rosy  
Bells,” CSP 346, italics original)

Words here hover between meanings and uses: are “name,” “heaps,” “bud,” “brown,” “cups,” and “slope” to be read as nouns or as verbs? Of course it must be both, and such dialectical flickering comes to illuminate even more semantically secure words, so that one is tempted to read even the nouns “mountains,” “anthers,” and “discords” as verbs, while the verbs “turn” and “aspire,” and even the adjectives “silvery,” “lightpierced,” and “papery” take on a sort of thingliness—meanwhile hyphens create “words” that suggest whole eras (“dutch-art”) or environments (“uptrilled-thundershower”). Meaning, like the image, is deferred, but the act of meaning-making, of affinity and attunement to language, is foregrounded: “The *Flowers* stand, in all their apparent distance from ‘common speech,’ as rooted in a faith that words *do* lead

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<sup>20</sup> Think for example of the coincidences that drive the plots of Shakespeare’s pastoral plays: the usurping Duke Frederick’s fortuitous encounter “with an old religious man” (5.4.160) at the end of *As You Like It*; the love plot between Florizel and Perdita, children of the estranged kings Polixenes and Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale*, is brought about by chance (Florizel: “I bless the time / When my good falcon made her flight across / Thy father’s ground” [4.4.14-16]); and the action of *The Tempest* is set in motion “By accident most strange, bountiful Fortune, / Now my dear lady, hath mine enemies / Brought to this shore” (1.2.178-180). Romantic coincidence produces the idyll’s exemption from within a larger epic-historical narrative, experienced as a kind of temporary “thickening” of time; and coincidence can also bring about the resumption of narrative-epic flow. See Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” p. 103.

back, if not toward an identifiable ‘Reality’ or ‘Truth,’ then toward some communal ground that is anterior to, and greater than, the mediated ‘senses’ of the present” (Johnson 263). Zukofsky’s impacted ecolage evokes this anterior “communal ground” of pastoral community while avoiding the undialectical nostalgia of a sentimental or totalizing pastoral.

But the question must be raised: can anyone dwell on such a ground? Dmitri Spivak, founder of “the Linguistics of Altered States of Consciousness (LISS) group at Moscow University” (270) comments thusly on *80 Flowers*: “These are most beautiful. The poems, you see, are written in the poet’s true native tongue, but I don’t mean English in the restricted sense of it. I mean, you see, that the language has been made pure to reveal the endless glossolalia at its heart” (quoted in Johnson 271). This strange nostalgia for glossolalia, a state of fragmentation associated with schizophrenia, would seem to preserve language as a field of difference at the cost of any coherence whatever, forcing us back with Michele Leggott onto the raveling together of source materials. This is the real risk a radical ecolour runs: a postmodernism that reifies the schizoid, that worships the negative *qua* negativity. Though the process is driven by Adorno’s ethical prohibition on the representation of utopia, such an ethics might paradoxically leave the text stranded beyond the reach of any who are not willing to chase down its references and so archive its prestige. Johnson: “While in modernist poetics citation and quotation tend to be entered as hidden clue or learned allusion to a more ennobling past, Zukofsky permutes words and phrases of his multiple sources as strands in a fluid, nonlinear, and nonhierarchical field. Words of the present and past are enfolded anew into the ‘open sea of simultaneity’” (269). Does not the practice of reading Zukofsky’s postmodern pastoral run the risk of collapsing back into modernist ennoblement, even if the return of the native is now understood to be a return of glossolalia? Our investigation must now

turn to a poet, Ronald Johnson, who sought to navigate that open sea toward a constructed and provisional universal. His long poem *ARK* represents a new phase of late modernist pastoral, one that extends ecologic assembly toward the goal of poetic dwelling within language's nature.

## CHAPTER 4

### Ronald Johnson's Constructivist Pastoral

#### 1. *A Poet Excluding History?*

Of the poets discussed in this study, Ronald Johnson is the least well known, though that is beginning to change.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps not coincidentally, his engagement with pastoral within the modernist horizon defined by Pound and Zukofsky is the most self-conscious and direct. In a sense we come full circle with Johnson: from Pound's fascist pastoral generatively broken in *Pisa* and the intensive, fragmentary eclogue of Zukofsky, we come with Johnson to a new attempt at a pastoral totality, a fully inhabitable structure. His masterpiece *ARK* is organized around the metaphor of architecture, a metaphor that has been picked up on in the as yet limited critical discussion of the poem.<sup>2</sup> As Mark Scroggins notes, Johnson "stuck to" this metaphor "through thick and thin," and he believes it is one of the things that saved Johnson from "the 'risks and shipwrecks' of those coming before him" in writing a long poem (the other being the model of Zukofsky's "*A*") (*Louis Zukofsky* 146). Johnson himself asserts this in the 1991 text "A Note" that was subsequently published at the end of the 1996 Living Batch Press edition of *ARK*:

The idea of *ARK* came when I was able at last to conceive it a structure rather than diatribe, artifact rather than argument, a veritable shell of the chambered nautilus, sliced and polished, bound for Ararat unknown. Of stout pioneer stock, grandson of prairie settlers come to

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<sup>1</sup> Chicago publisher Flood Editions published Johnson's posthumous book *The Shrubberies* in 2001 (edited by his executor, Peter O'Leary) and a reissue of his 1977 "treatment" of the first four books of *Paradise Lost*, *Radi Os*, in 2005. The Living Batch Press edition of *ARK*, published in 1996, is currently out of print, but Johnson's work has been the subject of new critical attention in recent years, including a "Tribute to Ronald Johnson" panel that took place at Poets House in New York City on March 16, 2006; the participants were Joel Bettridge, Barbara Cole, Jena Osman, Jonathan Skinner, and myself.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Eric Selinger, "*ARK* as a Garden of Revelation," *Fracture* 1 (2000): 153-71, and Stephen Collis, "The Frayed Trope of Rome: Poetic Architecture in Robert Duncan, Ronald Johnson, and Lisa Robertson," *Mosaic* 35.4 (December 2002): 143-62.

Kansas in a covered wagon, I grew up in no concert with ideas whatsoever, on land devoid of communal landmark, smack in the middle of a windy flat expanse of grass. Over such reaching gulf, who could resist constructing an Ozimandias of the spirit? (n.p.)

Here Johnson articulates a recognizably Objectivist desire for poetic language to reach beyond the discursive and become an object conceivable as both home and vehicle, a natural object (“veritable shell of the chambered nautilus”) that bears the artisanal mark of human hands (“sliced and polished”); as Scroggins has noted, this seems a naïve and literal reinterpretation of Zukofsky’s poetics: “Zukofsky’s notion of the poem as autotelic object is considerably more nuanced than Johnson’s, for Johnson interprets the rhetoric of Objectivist poetics to imply that the poem must be an object itself or must structurally mime an object (his preferred model ... being an architectural one)” (*Louis Zukofsky* 298). At the same time, Johnson constructs an origin myth for this desire from the image of pioneers in a trackless West: a tabula rasa that goes beyond Williams’ call for “No ideas but in things,” for on Johnson’s prairie there are neither ideas nor things, only a “reaching gulf” that demands a new monument, “an Ozimandias of the spirit.” Johnson’s sometimes troubling willingness to embrace pioneer myths and a corny flags-and-bunting style of patriotism is here mitigated by the sly reference to Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” which memorializes the ruins of a monument in the desert with colossal irony: “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings, / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair! / Nothing beside remains.” Perhaps Johnson was also thinking of the figure of the sculptor in Shelley’s poem, whose mimesis of power is also its critique: “Near them, on the sand, / Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown, / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, / Tell that its sculptor well those passions read.” In Shelley’s poem, the sculptor’s implicit critique through form has been extended and completed by the

passage of time, which has reduced the work itself to the status of a ruin or fragment. But there is a further ambivalence, for “Ozimandias” contains the word “Oz,” and as Johnson remarks in a 1974 interview with Barry Alpert, “Probably the most seminal thing in my life was growing up and discovering the Oz books. I was about twelve or thirteen before I finally had to fact [sic] the fact that there was no way to get to Oz” (77). The word “Ozimandias” thus becomes an ambivalent container for Johnson’s intense utopian yearning. Within the context of “A Note,” “Ozimandias” is both fragment and ruin; and as Scroggins puts it in an article on the Scottish poet-gardener Ian Hamilton Finlay (a friend of Johnson’s), “The Romantic fragment is a world unto itself, ‘isolated from the surrounding world,’ but simultaneously the indicator of a desired but unreachable ideal wholeness; the modernist fragment—Davenport’s Sappho, Pound’s ‘Papyrus’—like the Romantic ruin, is an index that points back towards a lost historical totality” (“The Piety of Terror,” n.p.). In this one word, then, are contained layers of allusion that slyly criticize and re-adapt the utopian negativity of the Romantic ruin and the historicist nostalgia of the modernist fragment. In some respects Johnson’s career will prove to be an attempt to synthesize these attitudes, the Romantic and the modernist, primarily through adapting the modernist techniques of collage and concrete poetry to the Romantic end of negation in the service of transcendence.

Johnson’s devotion to the architectural metaphor is intended at least in part as a kind of insulation from the egotistical wreckage left in the wake of an Ozymandias, or an Ezra Pound: “To spend twenty odd years writing a poem, undeterred by risks and shipwrecks of those before, would seem sheer folly. They stand before me, great obstacles” (“A Note”). Johnson tropes his task as Adamic, evading history by standing outside it through a reassertion of Edenic time: “If my confreres wanted to write a work with all history in its maw, I wished, from the beginning, to start all over again,

attempting to know nothing but a will to create, and matter at hand” (“A Note”). However, the “matter at hand” for Johnson is not primeval Chaos but others’ texts: like Zukofsky, he is committed to a palimpsestic mode of building: “Literally an architecture, ARK is fitted together with shards of language, in a kind of cement of music” (“A Note”). Some of these “shards of language” will be derived from natural history, with which Johnson intertwines his personal history, turning both into myth:

I wrote in an early note to *The Foundations*: “Let us imagine inside these covers, a monument dedicated *Bison bison bison* (Imagine it so carved) at base, and located if place could be put, on those shelving prairies between Ashland and Dodge City, Kansas, as a span between Big and Little Basins, centering over St. Jacob’s Well. This near legendary “bottomless” pool can be looked up in *National Geographic*, but as I knew it in childhood it was a real magic place tales were told of as exciting as those from the Brothers Grimm.” As Gertrude Stein said, “anyone is as their land and air is.” (“A Note”)

Johnson’s self-description of his own rootedness in place make him appear a kind of nativist naif, but these claims are tactical: having lived many years in San Francisco and having traveled extensively in Europe (including a walking tour of Britain he made in the early 1960s with his mentor and lover Jonathan Williams that resulted in Johnson’s most overtly pastoral work, *The Book of the Green Man* [1967]), his experience was far more cosmopolitan than this passage suggests. His affection for Americana was quite real: as an author of cookbooks his best known work is *The American Table*, a cornucopia of regional American cuisines, and *ARK* is punctuated by images of a small-town, midwestern landscape that we might well associate with Norman Rockwell, as well as bunting-like fragments of patriotic language and song. Yet there is a degree of irony in his citation of Stein, who notoriously returned to her

native “land and air” of Oakland, California, only to declare that there was no there there.

In an interview with Peter O’Leary, Johnson compares himself with Charles Ives, saying, “He was like me—he knew a lot about music, but he wanted to appear a naif, to get back to where you don’t know anything about art. And then you construct something” (48). Johnson’s just-folks demeanor—“I’m a home-grown poet” (37)—is another ward against the monumental modernist hubris that he invokes at the beginning of “A Note”: “the risks and shipwrecks of those before.” His assumption of a deliberately callow stance goes further than this, given his declared affinity for the methods of working of such “naive” or outsider artists as Simon Rodia, James Hampton, and Le Facteur Cheval—decidedly different antecedents than Pound’s Malatesta or even Zukofsky’s critical revision of Eliot. Unlike “my confreres [who] wanted to write a work with all history in its maw,” naïve artists do not conceive themselves as guardians and refurbishers of culture but rather feel themselves charged with a divine mission to build “gardens of revelation” out of the cheapest and most readily available materials. As Johnson writes of them, they

worked from an armature to an outer encrustation of curious rocks, broken colorful tiles or bits of glass, gold and silver foil—anything they could get their hands on from detritus of a world which had not eyes to see. Just so, *ARK* composed itself from the everyday fragments of phrase, words plucked out of context, trouvailles to be worked and knitted and sawn or welded in. (“Planting” 2, quoted in *Louis Zukofsky* 148)

As Scroggins comments, such a choice of forebears crucially revises the task of monument-building to become something literally much more down to earth:

“Johnson reconceives the modernist poetics of juxtaposition and the ‘luminous detail,’

revising it downward, as it were, into the realm of folk culture and bricolage. Or, to put it in less portentous terms: in *ARK*, the fragment or quotation is no longer a cultural index, but merely a shiny bit of language that fits into some crucial point of the poem's mosaic" (*Louis Zukofsky* 148). Scroggins here articulates something of a magpie poetics for Johnson, which perhaps undercuts slightly the emphasis on manual labor that we can hear in Johnson's own choice of words for his method: the "trouvailles" or found objects are "to be worked and knitted and sawn or welded in." These differently gendered verbs of artisanship (the feminine "knitted" counterbalances the masculine "sawn or welded"<sup>3</sup>) assert that if *ARK* is a garden, it resembles the gardens of naive artists that incorporate as much human-made material into their structures as they do plants and flowers. At the same time, Johnson claims that "*ARK* composed itself," suggesting that his stance toward the work is characterized by the watchful passivity that his mentor Zukofsky prescribes for an Objectivist writing that "occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist" (P+ 194). Further, these "things" are not prized bits of cultural plunder but junk, "everyday fragments of phrase" readily available to the bricoleur-poet, who foregoes accumulating the cultural capital assembled in the collages of Eliot and Pound. The structure that a naive artist builds from this junk will itself necessarily fail to take on the cultural value accruing to a *Waste Land* or a *Cantos*, instead standing apart from the "tradition" or "institution art" that the works of the high modernists attempt to overcome and incorporate in a modernist *Aufhebung*.

Johnson's adoption of the persona of naive artist is a self-conscious, cannily pastoral move: by "revising [modernist poetics] downward," in Scroggins' phrase,

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson's interest in knitting was genuine, as shown in a recently published letter that he wrote to Ian Hamilton Finlay that includes concrete poems which use visually "knitted" metaphors in an homage to the work of Robert Lax. See *jubilat* 12 [etc.]

Johnson establishes some distance between himself and the “great obstacles” of his predecessors, posing as a leech-gatherer looking respectfully yet slightly askance at so many ambitious Wordsworths: Pound and Williams, Zukofsky and Olson. The Romantic forebear that Johnson invokes by name is William Blake, who fits perfectly into Johnson’s schema of artists who combine the naive and visionary: “William Blake would be a guiding spirit: his advice to pay attention every moment: the very lightning, then thunder: a voice out of a cloud” (“A Note”). (In BEAM 2 Johnson brings Blake to Kansas, as it were, through a scientific prose description of a lightning storm that yields to the verse lines “A god in a cloud, / aloud.”) Johnson assumes that the quality of attention to “every moment” that he ascribes to Blake—a quality of attention associated with the visionary seer’s relation to a numinously intelligible nature—can be made consonant with a constructivist poetics of collage and juxtaposition. Yet Johnson’s idea of Blake can seem strangely one-sided; as Rachel Blau DuPlessis remarks, Johnson’s “Blakean mysticism of the doors of perception does not seem to have a Blakean politics of revolution attached” (105). Is there any place for the political vision of Blake in Johnson’s poetics, given his desire to evade the demands of history that helped to determine the “risks and shipwrecks” of his predecessors and produce “artifact rather than argument”? Perhaps not directly; but as in all pastoral, there is an implicitly critical dimension to Johnson’s adoption of the persona of naive artist. As Eric Selinger argues, the visionary constructions of bricoleur-artists like Hampton and Rodia resemble the cabinets of curiosities or *Wunderkammer* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; these cabinets

invited one to imagine a marvelous alternative to the known and local facts, whether natural or political—and to make that alternative real. The cabinet of curiosities was, writes John Dixon Hunt, a “memory theatre of that complete world lost with Eden but recoverable by human

skill.” And like so many evocations of the world before the Fall, whether by the Lollards or John Locke, it gave both the makers of these cabinets and their viewers a chance to measure things as they are against the way God meant them to be. “When Adam delved and Eve span,” they ask us, “who then was the gentleman?” Dinsmoor’s Garden of Eden makes this argument quite explicit, pitting its icons of Labor and Liberty against those of bankers and so forth. Other, more subtle environments make their case implicitly, often simply by being made by the people who made them. (“*ARK* as a Garden,” 158)<sup>4</sup>

The social position of these visionary artists lends their works, however mutely artifactual, a rhetorical dimension: poor, despised, and marginal, only in the realm of their art—which is not located in the institutions of high art but is something much more eccentric and isolated—do these artists assume any kind of significance for themselves: “Their vision teaches them not only the value of the discarded objects they work with, but also of their own transcendent value, their status as children of God, as higher beings reborn on an earthly plane, or most simply as self-declared saints” (“*ARK* as a Garden,” 159). In Beam 28 of *ARK*, “The Book of Orpheus,” Johnson gives us a prose description of the life and work of James Hampton, creator

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson’s own take on cabinets of curiosities emphasizes their use as a means of vision. He sees them as a kind of poetic precursor to the photograph, as he writes in a 1976 review of Guy Davenport’s *Flowers & Leaves*: “How to see and what to look for have off and on been questions since the inquisitive clear-eyed Greeks. Sappho would have understood Daguerre, who exclaimed: ‘I have made a “window” men look through’—till the New World, there, was hidden as a quasar, and buffalo could only be transcribed to transatlantic naturalists by means of equivalents: *the hump of a camel, the mane of a lion*, etc. These same gentlemen naturalists kept what were known as Cabinets of Curiosities (meteorites lumped with unicorn horns, and ‘life-like’ silver swans ‘seated upon artificial water’). They were to peer through the first microscopes to find ‘the Stones upon Salisbury Plain are as much alive as a Hive of Bees.’ This was the beginning again of seeing: with, and beyond, and within the eyes” (“Persistent Light Upon the Inviolably Forever Other,” 38, italics original).

of *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly*, now on display at the Smithsonian Institution:

He did not call himself an artist. Sometimes he would walk the street carrying a sack, picking up old chairs, wine bottles and cardboard. In one of his two lives he was almost friendless, poor and black, a janitor who labored for the General Services Administration. At midnight, when he finished, James Hampton would return to the garage he rented, for \$50 a month, that opened to an alley. There he donned his shining crown, did his holy work, and signed himself Saint James. (n.p.)

We can only speculate as to the origins of Johnson's sense of identification with Hampton and the other uneducated, socially disenfranchised artists that he cites as forebears. While he does not document an ambivalent relation between himself and high culture as Zukofsky does, a sense of extreme cultural poverty is conveyed by Johnson's description of himself growing up "in no concert with ideas whatsoever, on land devoid of communal landmark" ("A Note"). We might also reasonably expect that a gay man who came of age in the 1950s might feel a powerful sense of identification with a marginal figure like Hampton; yet Johnson's work is almost entirely bereft of the kind of bitterness and anger one might expect from such a position, as if he had been born the denizen of an Arcadia beyond the shadow of Rome. Many of the poems profess straightforward delight in homosexual desire, and only in some of the more elegiac passages from the last third of *ARK*, "The Ramparts" (described succinctly in "A Note" as "a night of the soul") and in his late work "Blocks to Be Arranged in the Form of a Pyramid: A Memorial for AIDS" do readers encounter any darkness of mood that can be directly linked to Johnson's experience as a gay man in the plague years. Selinger writes of Beam 25's "Bicentennial Hymn" that "At each point, Johnson has pruned his chosen texts to eliminate conflict, sadness, and

historical pain” (161); he also speculates that Johnson’s affinity for visionary landscapes such as Tolkien’s Middle Earth might stem in part from a painful sense of difference: “To be a young gay poet in Ashland, Kansas in the 1940s and early 50s might well feel like being an elusive, embattled member of the Fair Folk, whose beloved Mallorn trees appear in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*” (165).

Yet Johnson’s flight from history seems informed by another kind of historical sense, one dependent on a kind of gnosis derived from splicing the vision of Blake (the most socially marginal, and also the most joyful, of the English Romantics) with an implicitly American celebration of scientific apprehension and knowledge:

The Prophet Blake, who died singing songs inspired by the moment, is one of the prime movers of *Flowers & Leaves*. We are, by now, the first whole generation to rid ourselves of absolute fear of the imagination’s *terra incognita*, and to be able to read Blake as he meant us to. Our poets need even no longer go mad now physicists have begun to proposition a meta-Physics. That man of the future, Buckminster Fuller, reads like a William Blake who could also see “Newton’s Particles of light” not so much blown back to blind the physical eye, but a principle by which the eye works to frame the present. Golgonooza is what is happening now. (“Persistent Light,” 40)

Blake’s City of Imagination (in whose name the Land of Oz is once again embedded) is figured by Johnson as the work-in-progress of his generation of modernists, to be achieved through a Fullerian synthesis of the mythic and the scientific; or to put it in other terms, a reconciliation of Adorno and Horkheimer’s dialectic of enlightenment into a new mythos of liberation. Charles Olson and Robert Duncan are the major contemporaries and predecessors for such a project, and both are prominently cited/sited in Johnson’s poetry. The present as viewed from the perspective of

mythologized science is not exactly an unhistorical one, but as the zero point of myth and science (the former containing a kind of deep history of the past, the latter containing the germ of a redeemed, utopian future) it effectively excludes “historical pain” so that it is only negatively present in the manner described by Adorno in “On Lyric Poetry and Society”:

[T]he demand that the lyric word be virginal, is itself social in nature. It implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive, and this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work: the more heavily the situation weighs upon it, the more firmly the work resists it by refusing to submit to anything heteronomous and constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws. The work’s distance from mere existence becomes the measure of what is false and bad in the latter. In its protest the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different (“Lyric Poetry” 39-40).

The joyous playfulness of the majority of Johnson’s poetry, and its insistence on a Golgonooza of the present, read through Adorno suggests as a negative objective correlative the “hostile, alien, cold, oppressive” social situation that Adorno locates in late capitalism and that Johnson certainly experienced in an immediate way as a gay man from Ashland, Kansas.<sup>5</sup> Such a possibility cannot be dismissed for a poet who once wrote, “All great things are done by the force of opposites” (“Hurrah for Euphony,” Part I) and, later in the same essay of advice to younger poets, added “Because abstract, politics and economics are Scylla and Charybdis to a poet”

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<sup>5</sup> As Johnson writes in an unpublished autobiographical manuscript in 1997 titled *Up to Now*, “I learned quickly I was ‘different,’ as well as how to assert my masculinity when necessary,” and he remembers being “pursued by yahoos in pickups” as a child. Quoted in Susan M. Schultz, “‘Grandmothers and Hunters’: Ronald Johnson and Feminine Tradition” in *A Poetics of Impasse in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005): 129.

(“Hurrah for Euphony, Part II). Adroitly threading the needle by no means causes the needle to disappear. The pressure of reality cannot be evaded but must be answered with an equal or near-equal pressure of imagination. Fragments of Greek myth and nostalgic Americana are recombined in Johnson’s poetry with the figures and tropes of natural history, a form of history in which, as we have seen in Zukofsky’s “A”-22, historical pain can be embedded and its redemption looked for without demanding the kind of systematized abstract approach that tends too easily toward the totalitarian pastoral of Pound. Pound broke his own totalitarian tendencies in Pisa by choosing the negative logic of the fragment; Zukofsky takes that logic to its limit in the condensery<sup>6</sup> of “A”-22 and *80 Flowers*. Johnson’s paradoxical task is the building of an Arcadian poem that will in fact form an inhabitable, positive totality—but without at any point succumbing to the lure of abstraction that he figures as the Scylla and Charybdis of politics and economics. History, in other words, is banned; and even the ambiguous political-economic implications of natural history can only be permitted in their latent, embryo form. Like Baum’s Oz and Tolkien’s Middle Earth, Johnson aims in *ARK* toward the creation of an imaginary world whose primary relation to the historical world is negative—sheer “distance from mere existence.” At the same time, that world is to be composed of living fragments of the world as Johnson finds it. His constructivist pastoral does not ultimately depend upon Poundian strategies of mythic territorialization; instead it extends the Zukofskyan tactic of ecolage toward the radical acceptance of the natural and literary worlds as he has inherited them. As “naïve” construct, *ARK* contains the history of what Adorno calls “the wayside”:

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<sup>6</sup> A word taken from the Objectivist poet Lorine Niedecker and her poem “Poet’s Work” which ends with the lines, “No layoff / from this / condensery.” *Condensery* is not the coinage it may appear, but a real term for a factory in which condensed milk is made: it thus gives agrarian and pastoral associations to Objectivist poetics in a remarkably succinct way.

If Benjamin said that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside—what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic. It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory.

(MM 151)

Johnson's late modernist Arcadia is precisely a "wayside"—a space outside of and marginal to history conceived of as "the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat." So, rather than pursuing escapist fantasy and a poetics of quietism, Johnson bases his pastoral upon a wholly pragmatic utopianism that puts both poet and reader in a new relation to the detritus of the American landscape: one of mutual caretaking and mutual enchantment.

## ***2. The Forest of Arden***

From his earliest mature writing, Johnson expresses a desire for a habitable poetry, sprung from the nexus of literature and nature that is the genre of natural history, and in particular natural history as written by poets. "Shake, Quoth the Dove House," the first poem in his first full-length book, the 1964 volume *A Line of Poetry, A Row of Trees*, begins with a citation from Alexander Pope's satirical "Catalogue of Greens," an attack on the artificiality of topiary plants and formal gardens; written in 1713, it is a kind of prequel to Pope's 1731 "Essay on Taste" in which gardeners are instructed to "Consult the genius of the place." Yet as collaged into the context of

Johnson's poem, Pope's satirical intent is supplemented by Johnson's delight in the extravagance of both Pope's language and what that language represents:

'A laurustine bear in blossom  
with a juniper hunter in berries,  
a lavender pig with sage growing in his belly  
& a pair of maidenheads in fir, in great  
forwardness'.

This is the Garden, where all is a poet's  
topiary. Where even the trees  
shall have tongues, green aviaries  
to rustle at his will.

And as I sit here, my pipe  
alight, coos like a turtle-dove in the wood—

its smoke a live-oak, in still air.

Where  
the smokes curl up, the moss hangs down:  
let us call it Arden

& live in it! (*Valley of Many-Colored Grasses* 17)

Johnson's capitalized "Garden" is accumulative, if not assimilative: the eighteenth-century dispute between those who favored "natural" gardens and landscapes and those who preferred the formal and classical<sup>7</sup> is overcome by the claim that here, "all is a poet's / topiary." If anything, Johnson slightly favors the artificial, or at least the mythic, by emphasizing the role of the poet's Orphic "will" in gifting the trees with tongues, while his pipe is Ovidianly transformed into a "turtle-dove" and its smoke into "a live-oak, in still air." There is yet a third mythic figure suggested here, that of Prometheus, by the plural "smokes," which suggests that the poet's breath collaborates with fire so as to "curl up" toward the transcendent; the paradoxical effect of this is to

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting here that Pope himself straddled both sides of the line: his satirical "Catalogue" was intended as a response to Addison and Steele's attacks on Pope's own *Windsor Forest* for its artificiality, its deployment of classical tropes and mythology rather than English imagery, and its Tory politics.

produce an image of “moss hang[ing] down” which can then be posited as an earthly, yet literary shelter: “let us call it Arden // & live in it!” The plural pronoun also suggests a pastoral community of poet-shepherds whose collective place is to be called “Arden.” Shakespeare’s Arden is the archetypal setting for Johnson’s pastoral, an Arcadian space in which withdrawal from the human world enables the Orphic communion and communication with nature: “And this our life exempt from public haunt / Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones and good in every thing” (2.1.15-17). Typically, Johnson suppresses the negativity in Duke Senior’s situation, preferring not to allude to the preceding lines, “Sweet are the uses of adversity, / Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous, / Wears yet a precious jewel in his head” (2.1.12-14); he emphasizes the poet’s creative power while eliding the pressure of adversity that might first have stimulated that creativity. The poem continues with a citation from a 1712 essay by Pope’s enemy Joseph Addison that celebrates the superiority of the poet’s imagination over nature:

For the poet  
 ‘may draw into his Description  
 all the Beauties of the Spring & Autumn, & make  
 the whole year contribute  
 something to render it the more agreeable.  
 His Rose-Trees, Wood-bines & Jessamines may flower  
 together,  
 & his beds be cover’d  
 at the same time  
 with Lilies, Violets & Amaranths.  
 His Soil is not restrained to any Set of Plants, but  
 is proper  
 either for Oaks or Myrtles,  
 & Oranges may grow

wild in it’. (*Valley* 17-18)

In the paragraph preceding the one that Johnson adapts into verse, Addison explains how the poet’s dissatisfaction with the given world leads him toward “mending and perfecting Nature”:

But because the Mind of Man requires something more perfect in Matter, than what it finds there, and can never meet with any Sight in Nature which sufficiently answers its highest Ideas of Pleasantness; or, in other Words, because the Imagination can fancy to it self Things more Great, Strange, or Beautiful, than the Eye ever saw, and is still sensible of some Defect in what it has seen; on this account it is the part of a Poet to humour the Imagination in its own Notions, by mending and perfecting Nature where he describes a Reality, and by adding greater Beauties than are put together in Nature, where he describes a Fiction. (*The Spectator* No. 418. Monday, June 30 1712)

Addison cautions that nature still prescribes certain limits to the poet's imagination: "he has the modelling of Nature in his own Hands, and may give her what Charms he pleases, provided he does not reform her too much, and run into Absurdities, by endeavouring to excel." But it seems clear that Johnson's careful selections from Pope, Shakespeare, and Addison are designed to grant the widest possible license to his pastoral poetics, asserting the prominence of the Orphic will while de-emphasizing the closeness of the pastoral condition to exile or the risk of "excelling" nature. The closing movement of the poem describes an Arcadian space that is more like an Ovidian workshop, in which the transformative power of imagination is given precedence over the forms found in nature:

It is here—  
(the growing walls  
a ceiling green  
  
above me)  
I have made clear space  
  
to cultivate  
  
the Wild, Espaliered, Tangled,  
Clipped

estate. Here—

both lines of poetry, rows  
of trees,  
shall spring all

seasons  
out 'of the lust of

the earth,  
without  
a formal seed'.

And the doves, overnight, will rise  
as a *fumus*

*terrae*:  
inhabitants of air  
& undergrowth

alike. (*Valley* 18-19)

Johnson transforms the “growing walls” of nature, and the eighteenth-century discourse of nature, into a room with “a ceiling green” in which “his will” has “made clear space // to cultivate” an “estate” that combines without reconciling the Romantic and Classical aesthetics of nature: “Wild, Espaliered, Tangled, / Clipped.” They are “both lines of poetry, rows / of trees”; Johnson puns here on the double meaning of “stich,”<sup>8</sup> but he is also asserting his claim to a dual legacy: a pastoral poetics capacious enough to encompass both the proto-Romantic aesthetic of Addison and the Augustan aesthetic of Pope. His final citation is from Francis Bacon’s defense of “Poesy” in *The Advancement of Learning*; the full sentence reads, “In this third part of learning, which is poesy, I can report no deficiencie. For being as a plant that cometh of the lust of the earth, without a formal seed, it hath sprung up and spread abroad more than any other

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<sup>8</sup> See William Harmon, “The Poetry of a Journal at the End of an Arbor in a Watch.” *Parnassus* 9.1 (1981): 217-32.

kind” (quoted in Sewell 106). This is an attractive image for a poet acutely conscious of having “sprung up” without the benefit of “a formal seed” on the prairies of Kansas; it is also an assertion, with Bacon, that poetry is a kind of self-engendered learning, capable of producing knowledge as nature produces itself. “Poesy” is valued above all by Johnson for its capaciousness, as when the “doves” of the title are transformed into “*fumus // terrae; / inhabitants of air / & undergrowth // alike*”: an image that encompasses transcendence and immanence, the spiritual and the material. The doves’ metamorphosis represents the Orphic interaction of poetry with nature, alluding as well to the passage from *Romeo and Juliet* from which Johnson takes his poem’s title:

‘Tis since the earthquake now aleven years  
 And she was wean’d—I never shall forget it—  
 Of all the days of the year, upon that day;  
 For I had then laid wormwood to my dug  
 Sitting in the sun under the dove-house wall:  
 My lord and you were then at Mantua—  
 Nay, I do bear a brain—but, as I said,  
 When it did taste the wormwood on the nipple  
 Of my dug and felt it bitter, pretty fool,  
 To see it tetchy and fall out wi’ the dug!  
 Shake, quoth the dove-house; ‘twas no need, I trow,  
 To bid me trudge. (1.3.23-34)

The Nurse’s tale is a comic retelling of the expulsion from Eden, in which the baby Juliet’s weaning corresponds with an earthquake that causes the “dove-house” seemingly to speak. That speech combines part of its author’s name (“Shake”) with the very voice of nature, which seems to go beyond the pathetic fallacy in corresponding with the suffering of the infant deprived of the breast toward the mute expression of suffering that Adorno attributes to dominated nature: “Natural things are expressive when they speak of—that is, point or refer to—the domination and attendant suffering that they have undergone historically” (Stone 245). Johnson’s poem proposes a restoration of that Edenic state by reintegrating the alienated dual nature of the doves—as living creatures and as metaphors—in a capacious pastoral

language that dissolves or suspends the difference between external nature and human nature, wilderness and garden, world and word. To a large degree he follows the program suggested by Zukofsky in “A”-6:

Natura Naturans –  
Nature as creator,  
Natura Naturata –  
Nature as created.

He who creates  
Is a mode of these inertial systems –  
The flower – leaf around leaf wrapped  
around the center leaf (A-6/22-23)

The two aspects of nature as creative and created are rendered by Zukofsky as “inertial systems” of which the poet is a “mode” or medium rather than the director. Johnson’s claim that the tongues of the trees shall “rustle at his will” is less modest: he seems willing to claim the position of “the center leaf” for himself—an image appropriate to Johnson’s later use of symmetrically centered lines. Johnson calls it “a bilateral unity in form” (O’Leary interview 41), explicitly likening it to the human body and, even more so, to the form of a tree: “It’s one of the great structures: it’s got depths and heights, it’s got circulation, it goes into streams. It goes into stream patterns, which is what branches do. I think time makes things a tree” (42). This visually distinct verse-form makes its first notable appearance in the 1966 “Letters to Walt Whitman” and goes on to provide the dominant shape of *ARK*.

With his assertion of a creative role for the poet as both immanent to and transcending nature, Johnson extends the bounds of his pastoral to encompass both the empirical and the mythic, the scientific and the visionary: it is at least potentially a dialectic of myth and enlightenment. Bacon is a key figure here: Adorno and Horkheimer begin their essay “The Concept of Enlightenment” with him, quoting him as the voice of technology and the conversion of knowledge into power: “[T]he sovereignty of man lieth hid in knowledge; wherein many things are reserved, which

kings with their treasure cannot buy, nor with their force command; their spials and intelligencers can give no news of them, their seamen and discoverers cannot sail where they grow: now we govern nature in opinions, but we are thrall unto her in necessity: but if we would be led by her in invention, we should command her by action” (quoted in *DoE* 1). For Adorno and Horkheimer, Bacon is the progenitor of the technological mode of knowledge, that which dominates by its concept and is utterly antithetical to poetry:

The “happy match” between human understanding and the nature of things that [Bacon] envisaged is a patriarchal one: the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanted nature. Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters.... Technology is the essence of this knowledge. It aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labor of others, capital.... What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts. (2)

However, Bacon is capable of furnishing a more poetic legacy, as derived from Elizabeth Sewell’s 1961 book *The Orphic Voice: Poetry and Natural History*. Critic Rachel Blau du Plessis has described this book as a work of “vatic criticism” (du Plessis 107), and Johnson wrote of it, “When I read Elizabeth Sewall’s [sic] *The Orphic Voice* I knew I wanted to be of that order of writer she talked about” (“Hurrah for Euphony, Part II” 25). For Sewell, the proto-scientist Bacon is not a handservant to the emerging technological logic of bourgeois capitalism; he is rather a poet and myth-maker, a “postlogical” thinker by virtue of his emphasis on the dynamism of “forms” (that is, “the inner laws of working of natural phenomena as they may be perceived, expressed, or translated by the mind,” “laws of motion and alteration” [136]), on

induction (“Bacon attacks the Aristotlian method, as he conceived it, of reasoning from first principles to particulars, and proposes instead his notion of induction, or reasoning which starts with observation of a number of particular cases and from these moves on to infer general principles” [144]), and on natural history, which crucially for Bacon includes the arts, as he writes in *Descriptio Globi Intellectualis*:

And I am the rather induced to set down the history of arts as a species of natural history, because it is the fashion to talk as if art were something different from nature, so that things artificial should be separated from things natural, as differing totally in kind; whence it comes that most writers of natural history think it enough to make a history of animals or plants or minerals, without mentioning the experiments of mechanical arts (which are far the most important for philosophy) ... Therefore as nature is ever one and the same, and her power extends through all things, nor does she ever forsake herself, these three things should by all means be set down as alike subordinate only to nature; namely, the course of nature; the wandering of nature; and art, or nature with man to help. And therefore in natural history all these things should be included in one continuous series of narratives.  
(quoted in Sewell 124, ellipsis in original)

Bacon here implicitly reunites all the arts under the name of *techne*, establishing poetry and technology as points on a continuum rather than fell opposites:

“Technology was for him part of this process, but the utilitarian Bacon, the father of the industrial revolution, does not on his own terms exclude the poet. Later centuries made that false division” (125). Instead of an agent of the dialectic of enlightenment, Sewell finds in Bacon’s “postlogic” “a logic holding to things, a logic of content as

well as form,” and thus an alternative theory of language as being akin to things rather than a force for abstraction and alienation:

In *De Principiis*, for example, he praises the pre-Socratic philosophers for their concept of their task, saying of them, “Therefore all these submitted their minds to the nature of things. Whereas Plato made over the world to thoughts; and Aristotle made over thoughts to words; men’s studies even then tending to dispute and discourse, and forsaking the stricter enquiry of truth.” The answer to this, for Bacon’s logic, would be to develop as far as possible the countertendency in words, their content and closeness to things, their mythical and poetic quality. (145-46)

Postlogic requires the philosopher to be a poet: to submit his or her mind to the nature of things, which includes the nature of words, “their content and closeness to things, their mythical and poetic quality.” Johnson’s stance toward nature in “Shake, Quoth the Dove House” is Baconian: while participating to some degree in the philosopher’s desire for power over nature through knowledge (particularly empirical observation), Johnson’s principle means of knowing shall be that of poetry, whose Orphic power over natural objects is paradoxically obtained through submission to them and through recognizing oneself and one’s own body as a natural object— what Adorno calls “a groping for the preponderance of the object” (*ND* 183) which puts the positivist project of domination through identity into question. The postlogic of Orpheus requires a dialectical negotiation between nature as creator and nature as created: it is no wonder, then, that Johnson should seize upon a poetics of collage and pastiche, producing palimpsestic arrangements of others’ texts in mosaic with his own acute observations of the natural world. This is, as Guy Davenport calls it in his introduction to *Valley of Many-Colored Grasses*, writing as a form of “ventilation,”

which Davenport carefully distinguishes from the poems of Johnson's contemporaries circa 1969:

If the finely textured geometry of words Ronald Johnson builds on his pages is not what we ordinarily call a poem, it is indisputably poetry. It is poetry written to a difficult music ("a different music," as the poet himself says). It is a poetry with a passion for exact, even scientific scrutiny. It incorporates in generous measure the words of other men. It does not *breathe* like most of the poetry we know. It is admirably unselfconscious—the work of a man far too occupied with realities to have given much thought to being a poet. (*Valley* 10, italics original).

To speak of ventilation rather than breath, of geometry as difficult and different music, is to validate a constructivist poetics over the poetry of sensitivity that Davenport lambastes:

The lyric poem from Sappho to Voznesensky with all its variants and transmutations has become for us the model of all poems. The credentials of the ideal western poem tend to lurk not in the poem but in the personality of the poet. All that Byron wrote is somehow not as great as Byron. This illusion, fostered by the scandal-mongering of professors and the Grundyism of psychology, is a lazy and essentially indifferent view of poetry. The poet, who writes not for himself but to provide the world with an articulate tongue, longs to be as absent from his finished work as Homer. *Objective* and *subjective* are modes in the critic's mind; the poet scarcely knows what they mean. (10, italics original)

For Davenport, the incorporation of others' texts into Johnson's poems is an index of their objectivity—a category that has dialectically overcome and incorporated

the subjective. There is a direct correlation, in his view, between “a passion for exact, even scientific scrutiny” and the incorporation “in generous measure the words of other men.”<sup>9</sup> “The quotations in Ronald Johnson’s poems are simply a part of the world, like Wordsworth’s daffodils, which the poet wishes to bring to us. The poet is at the edge of our consciousness of the world, finding beyond the suspected nothingness which we imagine limits our perception another acre or so of being worth our venturing upon” (11-12). What Davenport wishes to stress is Johnson’s commitment to poetic vision as *revision*, which is brought about primarily by through modernist forms of collage: “it is the conjunction, not the elements, that creates a new light. Much of Mr. Johnson’s imagery that seems so wonderfully clean and new has been discovered in out-of-the-way places. *Invention*, we remember, really means *finding*” (13, italics original). Davenport’s version of modernism is conservative in the classic sense:<sup>10</sup> the world of images is coextensive with the world of texts, and these can freshly illuminate each other without being lost or depleted.

### **3. *The Rocks Will Talk: Johnson as Concrete Poet***

“If the finely textured geometry of words Ronald Johnson builds on his pages is not what we ordinarily call a poem, it is indisputably poetry” (*Valley* 10).

Davenport’s distinction between “poem” and “poetry” seems to depend upon a conception of Johnson’s poetry as a “finely textured geometry,” a visual metaphor at least as strong as the subsequent description of Johnson’s difficult/different “music.”

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<sup>9</sup> The gendering of Johnson’s practice of citation comes under valuable scrutiny in Susan M. Schultz’s essay, “‘Grandmothers and Hunters’: Ronald Johnson and Feminine Tradition,” *op cit*.

<sup>10</sup> Davenport’s modernism is also conservative in the political sense, as we might expect from a longtime contributor to *National Review*. Davenport follows the above description of Johnson’s process with a remarkable anecdote: “It was Louis Zukofsky, a friend of Whittaker Chambers and an alumnus of Columbia in its Reddest heyday, who read Gibbon with an eye to seeing what Marx would have done about it all and thus bade farewell to Marx and all his host” (13-14). Zukofsky’s relation to Marx and Marxism is of course far more complex and equivocal than this suggests.

The analogy of poetry to geometry suggests that poetry can be a mode of measurement and an instrument of knowledge creation, while hinting at the distance between what Johnson does and the more discursive artifact of “what we ordinarily call a poem.” It is thus no wonder that one of Johnson’s most remarkable and enduring engagements was with the concrete poetry movement that emerged on the world scene in the 1960s: the appeal of text-as-image and image-as-text was tremendous to Johnson, a poet who takes a deliberately naive stance toward the objectivity of language.

The connections between the Concrete Poetry movement that began in the 1950s and the tradition of modernist collage associated with Ezra Pound are well documented. The Sao Paulo poets Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos, and Décio Pignatari named themselves the *Noigandres* group, after the untranslatable Provençal word that appears in Canto 20 as a signifier of the indelible, untranslatable difference between the medieval and modernity: “Noigandres, eh, *noigandres* / Now what the DEFFIL can that mean!” As Mary Ellen Solt writes in the introductory essay of her book *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, “The name *Noigandres* was both related to the world heritage of poetry and impossible for the literary experts to define” (12). While this group claimed such American and European modernists as Mallarmé, Joyce, Cummings, and Apollinaire as their forerunners, the transformation of the ideogrammic method of Pound and Fenollosa is central to their project. In their 1958 “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,” the *Noigandres* group describes their goals for a “verbicovisual” poetry (the term is taken from *Finnegans Wake*):

Ideogram: appeal to nonverbal communication. Concrete poem communicates its own structure: structure-content. Concrete poem is an object in and by itself, not an interpreter of exterior objects and/or more or less subjective feelings. Its material: word (sound, visual form, semantical charge). Its problem: a problem of functions-relations of this

material. Factors of proximity and similitude, gestalt psychology. Rhythm [sic]: relational force. Concrete poem, by using the phonetical system (digits) and analogical syntax, creates a specific linguistical area—“*verbicovisual*”—which shares the advantages of nonverbal communication, without giving up word’s virtualities. With the concrete poem occurs the phenomenon of meta-communication: coincidence and simultaneity of verbal and nonverbal communication; only—it must be noted—it deals with a communication of forms, of a structure-content, not with the usual message communication. (“Pilot Plan” 72, italics original)

The “Pilot Program” resembles Zukofsky’s prescriptions for Objectivist writing, taken to their logical extreme: the essay concludes with the sentence fragment, “The poem-product: useful object” (72). One can see the appeal of such a program for Johnson, who desires his *ARK* to be “structure rather than diatribe, artifact rather than argument” (“A Note”). But as Solt remarks, the essence of concrete poetry is “*reduced language*”: Pound’s *condensare* taken to its logical extreme, with the goal of “making an object to be perceived rather than read” (7, italics original). In that respect the archetypal concrete poem is probably Eugen Gomringer’s “Silencio,” in which language is made to resonate with its own absence:

silencio silencio silencio  
 silencio silencio silencio  
 silencio silencio silencio  
 silencio silencio silencio  
 silencio silencio silencio (Solt 91)

Of this poem, critic Neil Powell has written, “The whiteness of the page in Gomringer’s ‘Silencio’ is interrupted by a regimented raft of text, the image/poem gives the impression of disrupted calm. The pattern of disturbance finds further verification in the printed insistence of the word ‘Silencio’ and we are forced to

speculate that 'Silencio' might be construed as a remorseless and monotonous instruction to the reader. The text-image and page space in 'Silencio are intended to be mutually definitive, but as with many other concrete poems, the effect of text as image effectively seems to disconnect the act of reading from the narrative possibilities of language" (unpaginated). The severe limitations of concrete poetry thus cannot be separated from its possibilities: the extreme reduction of language necessitates its renunciation not just of "argument" and "diatribe" but the broader resources of narrative.

In some respects the concrete poetry movement revisits the situation of the Imagists in the 1920s, whose orthodoxy of vivid perception proved a stumbling block for poets like Pound who wished to incorporate the discourses of history and literature into their work. The obvious difference is that whereas the Imagists and later the Objectivists were preoccupied with mimesis, often of natural objects, concrete poems are rarely mimetic of anything except language itself: they are as, the "Pilot Plan" suggests, phenomena of "meta-communication." As Solt writes, "the concrete poet seeks to relieve the poem of its centuries-old burden of ideas, symbolic reference, allusion and repetitious emotional content; of its servitude to disciplines outside itself as an object in its own right for its own sake" (8). The goal would seem to be the expression of the dialectical mimesis through which, as Adorno suggests, a non-exploitative relation to nature may be discovered: "The more that art is thoroughly organized as an object by the subject and divested of the subject's intentions, the more articulately does it speak according to the model of a nonconceptual, non-rigidified significative language; this would perhaps be the same language that is inscribed in what the sentimental age gave the beautiful if threadbare name, 'The Book of Nature.'" (*Aesthetic Theory* 67). Certainly the single word that is the building block for Gomringer's "Silencio" manifests as non-conceptual, most especially in tension

with the other, negative building block of the poem: the white space that surrounds it on the page and that resounds as the absence at the poem's center, making explicit and literal the gap between signifier and signified. Similarly, a poem built as Gomringer's is from a single word not only escapes what Solt calls "disciplines outside itself"—the non-poetic demands put on the poem—but the rigidity of syntax itself, making "Silencio" one of the purest possible examples of the modernist privileging of disjunction over more hierarchical modes of arrangement: for here the signifier is effectively juxtaposed with or made visible alongside its signified, and so put in a thesis-antithesis relation with itself.

By "speaking" silence and pushing the normally hidden gap between sign and referent into the foreground, Gomringer's poem manifests as a gesture toward Mallarmé's *poesie pure*. His poem also withholds the subjective and affective content that we associate with lyric: an impoverishment that Adorno would approve for its privileging of language's objectivity: "the highest lyric works are those in which the subject, with no remaining trace of mere matter, sounds forth in language until language itself acquires a voice" ("Lyric Poetry" 43). "Silencio" appears to rebuke the ordinary lyric impulse in both other poets and its readers; as Powell notes, the poem "might be construed as a remorseless and monotonous instruction to the reader." Indeed, a poem like Gomringer's resists "reading" as such: as Solt says, "the concrete poet is concerned with making an object to be perceived rather than read" (7). But it is this aspect of the concrete poem that suggests its pastoral function: as thing rather than utterance, the concrete poem asks the reader to stand in the same relation to it as the Kantian observer of the beautiful stands to the flower that pleases without a concept. R.P Draper has referred to such concrete poems as the "constellations" of Gomringer as "rhetoric without syntax" (332); the disabling of syntax, so fundamental to constructivist techniques such as collage, makes new relationships to language and its

elements possible. This is because syntax determines the relationship of text to temporality, creating meaning through the arrangement of elements that follow one after the other. The dislocation of syntax in concrete poetry, as in constructivist writing generally, disrupts the temporality associated with narrative and makes a new present tense possible. Hand in hand with concrete poetry's rejection of the discursive is its creative destruction of linearity, which goes far beyond the Poundian imperative to "break the pentameter." The *Noigrandes* poets imagined that concrete poetry was the necessary avant-garde step beyond a now "closed" history: "Concrete Poetry: product of a critical evolution of forms. Assuming that the historical cycle of verse (as formal-rhythmical unit) is closed, concrete poetry begins by being aware of graphic space as structural agent. Qualified space: space-time structure instead of mere linear-temporistical development" ("Pilot Plan" 72). A concrete poem like Gomringer's thus vibrates in the continuous present of the reader's perception, and part of this vibration stems from the energy of its rejection of the history of verse "as formal-rhythmical unit." Its use of white space and centering on the page also bespeaks a new attitude to space, which manifests as what these poets call "structure-content." A concrete poem communicates its structure as its primary content, presenting itself in the same key as architecture. The *Noigrandes* poets made this connection implicitly: as A.S. Bessa has pointed out, the group formed about the same time as the construction of Brazil's new modernist capital, Brasilia, was getting underway, and the language of the "Pilot Program" itself "is written in a highly controlled style, reminiscent of architectural jargon, which renders the whole text utterly impersonal. The poet is 'elevated' to the position of an architect or an engineer" (unpaginated).

The utopian possibilities of the constructivist posture extend to the reader as much to the poet, insofar as the reader is invited to participate in the construction of meaning, a role normally guided temporally by syntax. The elements of the poem exist

in aesthetic suspension, resistant to assimilation by a concept—instead, they continually enact the moment of producing new concepts that aesthetic experience spurs. Robert Kaufman understands constructivism as a utopian mode insofar as it releases both reader and writer from the imperatives of production:

[T]he static character of aesthetic suspension is not just a marker of utopian grace and escapist or futurist deferral, nor simply construction's other or prerequisite; it belongs formally *to* construction, to the present activity of constructing new concepts. The apparent timelessness of the eternal or perpetual here exists as something in construction; meanwhile, the release from focus on a goal (or on productionism's goal, the product) allows for concentration on the problem of construction (of imagining and making the form) itself.

(385)

As the German concrete poet Max Bense has written “Concrete poetry does not entertain. It holds the possibility of fascination, and fascination is a form of concentration, that is of concentration which includes perception of the material as well as apperception of its meaning” (Bense 73). The point, then, of the architectural metaphor as applied to concrete poetry lies not in the idea of the finished structure into which a reader might reside, but rather in the creation of an always-incomplete structure that the reader's engagement fills in—and it is that creative engagement with the text that constitutes the reader's dwelling in and around and with the text. This possibility of a creative, non-productive relation with language and landscape is the essence of a constructivist pastoral that could realize Heidegger's famous imperative, “man dwells poetically on the earth.” The relationship of the reader to the poem is not one of possession or production, but fascination—and we recall Frederic Jameson's definition of pastoral as distinguished from the utopian: “This kind of idyll or fantasy,

in other words, is, unlike Utopia, precisely a representation and musters its narrative resources in order to impose the fullness of an image of a different form of life, an image the fascinated contemplation of which includes both anxiety and longing within itself (“Islands” 82).

At the same time, a more critical utopian function for concrete poetry is suggested by the ambivalent structure-content of Gomringer’s poem: silence, a powerful figure for negativity and refusal. As Roland Barthes said of concrete poetry, “This art has the very structure of suicide, in it silence is a homogeneous poetic time which traps the word between two layers and sets it off less as a fragment of a cryptogram than as a light, a void, a murder, a freedom” (quoted in Bessa). Or as the *Noigandres* poets put it, “Concrete Poetry aims at the least common multiple of language. Hence its tendency to nounising and verbification... Hence its affinities with the so-called ‘isolating languages’ (Chinese)” (“Pilot Plan” 73). Bessa finds a political motive in the Brazilian Concrete Poets radical withdrawal from the full resources of the Portuguese language: “Isolation, claimed as a goal to be achieved in language, was also pursued by modernist architects, either through the final product—the building itself—or its basic components, or modules. Isolation as a goal in poetry might be imputed to Brazil’s repressive political atmosphere, for the era of development of concrete poetry is situated right between the end of the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas and the takeover by a military junta in 1964” (unpaginated). The negativity that comes with the renunciation of normative syntax, even of sound itself (for it is difficult to imagine how a poem like “Silencio” might be read aloud), goes hand in hand with concrete poetry’s renunciation of content as such.

If “Silencio” is an architectural space in which the reader is invited to dwell creatively, it is also a shelter from the imperatives of meaning-production carried by normative syntax, from forms of language—poetic and otherwise—in which readers

are *not* permitted to dwell. This would include the commercial forms of language concrete poetry most closely resembles, the language of billboards and advertisements. For Solt, the close resemblance of concrete poetry to the language of commercial visual design is an index of its modernity, even as she places hope in that poetry's capacity to contain a new content:

As we now move through our daily lives, our eyes are literally assaulted by designs of one kind or another. Every box of food we pick up or don't pick up in the super-market is covered with words and more or less enticing visual images to make us want to pick it up. Every cigarette we smoke against scientific medical advice was advertised into our consciousness. Every chair, table, knife, fork, spoon was designed by someone as an object for practical use, although some of these things are very beautiful. Our clothes, our cars, our appliances are designs. Some of the designs in our world are excellent, but their content is trivial. In some designs the content is insidious. If the new visual poem has found ways to use the materials and methods of presentation of the designer's world (mainly typography), ways to give them significant human and spiritual content; if it can find poetry in the designed world of our daily lives, then we should rejoice and stop worrying about the oral tradition. The plain fact is that *the oral tradition neglected the visual power of words.* (Solt 61)

This corresponds with Ronald Johnson's ideas about concrete poetry as conveyed in Dirk Stratton's monograph on the poet: "What Johnson is reacting to, and trying to remedy with his poems, is the invisibility of print in our culture: letters disappear into words, and the words become invisible the instant their signifying work is complete. Print has become so internalized the words are rarely acknowledged as things-in-

themselves; readers glean information from the printed page, oblivious to the mechanism that makes the transfer possible” (13). Still, the optimism conveyed by Solt and Johnson is difficult to reconcile with the sheer negativity of a poem like “Silencio,” whose silence dramatizes the inaccessibility of language as *ding-an-sich*. But it may be a critical error to conceive of the project of concrete poetry as the creation of finished products, stable structures that pursue stasis for its own sake rather than stimulating the reader’s own capacity to “shepherd” language.

The expressive possibilities that Solt wants to discover in this most constructivist of modes would seem to demand the reincorporation of sound into the concrete poem. This path suggested by A.S. Bessa’s consideration of the theory and work of the Swedish poet Öyvind Fahlström, whose vision of concrete poetry is more musical than visual. Instead of emphasizing negation of “the oral,” the creative principle of Fahlström’s “concretism” is that of making the abstract concrete, perceptible, and subject to analysis:

“Concretism” for Fahlström is thus less related to the *béton-armé* of modernist architecture than to the belief that words carry meaning. In 1973 he wrote, “Like many people, I began to understand during the late ‘60s that words like ‘capitalism,’ ‘exploitation,’ ‘alienation,’ were not mere ideas or political slogans, but stood for terrifying, absurd, and inhumane conditions in the world.” This, one might add, was the culmination, radical and politicized, of a process initiated in the early 1950s—a process of analyzing, understanding, “concretizing.” Concrete poetry is an instrument, as he puts it, “to analyze our wretched human condition,” and the human element is translated into language through an organic relationship to reality: “The concrete reality of my worlets is not at all in opposition to the reality of their

surroundings: they are neither dream-sublimation nor futuristic fantasy, but an organic part of reality I am living in although with their own principles for life and development.” (Bessa)

Bessa sets up a dichotomy between primarily visual versus primarily sound-based concrete poetics, associating the former with architectural metaphors and the latter with “the systematic as organic and the organic as a system” (Bessa). The one suggests a static and separatist model for concrete poetry, the other a critical and dynamic “instrument” for analysis; these two models neatly separate concrete poetry in its more pastoral mode from a utopian-analytical concrete poetry. But pastoral, particularly a constructivist pastoral, is never simply a form of positivist wish-fulfillment; it always stands in some relation to the critical negativity that gives utopian art its force and relevance.

Most of Ronald Johnson’s concrete poetry comes closer to the architectural ideal of the *Noigandres* poets than it does to Fahlström’s critical concretism. But his attention to sound in his concrete poems perhaps points the way toward an understanding of *ARK* as a giant concrete poem that combines the “radical withdrawal” of pastoral with its more critical capacity to produce “an organic relationship to reality” by historicizing nature and the human relationship with it, in part by presenting language itself as a natural object (this recalls one of the primary claims of the *Noigandres* poets: “The lyrical richness and graphic flair of Apollinaire’s work persuaded the founder members of the ‘Noigandres,’ the de Campos brothers and Decio Pignatari, to consider the possibility of allowing the reader to encounter language in much the same way as one might experience natural phenomenon” [Powell n.p.]). In this vein, the most sustained and successful of Ronald Johnson’s concrete poems, pre-*ARK*, is probably his 1970 sequence “Songs of the Earth” (which he himself proudly called “the ultimate concrete poem” [O’Leary interview 47]). In a

prefatory note he describes the sequence as a Thoreauvian attempt at listening to what cannot be heard, that is, silence:

Thoreau, as he walked year after year the Concord woods, was the first to record the musics of silence. "Silence," he writes on his night-walks, "is of various depth and fertility, like soil." "As I leave the village, drawing nearer to the woods, I listen from time to time to hear the hounds of Silence baying the Moon. I hear the unspeakable." (*Adam* 65)

For Thoreau and for Johnson, listening to the silence of nature is the precondition for making it speak. Johnson's poem "earth" is the heart of "Songs of the Earth" and its visual arrangement immediately recalls "Silencio," suggesting a reply to Gomringer's poem:

earhearthearth  
earhearthearth  
earhearthearth  
earhearthearth  
earhearthearth  
earhearthearth (*Adam* 67)

Johnson's poem discovers the heartbeat of other words pulsing inside of "earth": *hearth*, *heart*, *hear*, *ear*, *art*, and even *the* (recalling Zukofsky's remark that "a case can be made out for the poet giving some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a*: both of which are weighted with as much epos and historical destiny as one man can perhaps resolve" [P+ 10]). Like many of Johnson's early concrete poems, "earth" was eventually collaged into the matrix of *ARK*, appearing as "BEAM 24" in large type with this text appearing beneath it:

"any piece of counterpoint includes  
a silent part  
for the rhythmic movements of heart and  
lungs"

(*lilacs*)

(n.p.)

The quoted language comes from Claude Levi-Strauss' book *The Raw and the Cooked*; the complete passage reads:

Music appeals not only to psychological time but also to physiological and even visceral time; this appeal is not absent in the case of mythology, since the telling of the story may be of "breath-taking" interest, but it is not as essential as in music: any piece of counterpoint includes a silent part for the rhythmic movement of heart and lungs.

(quoted in Clifton 167, p. 16 in the 1969 edition)

It is characteristic of Johnson's work in general (but most especially in *ARK*) to collage others' texts into his own, using quotation marks to indicate the presence of another writer's language but providing no attribution for it.<sup>11</sup> In this case the adaptation of this portion of "Songs of the Earth" into "BEAM 24" demonstrates the remarkable consistency of Johnson's project: the Levi-Strauss performs a similar function in framing our reading of the later version of the poem as the Thoreau quotation that Johnson uses in his introduction to its original. In both cases Johnson wants to alert us to the presence of silence as necessary "counterpoint" to his "song," exactly as if he were offering an oblique commemoration of "Silencio." It is also characteristic for Johnson to attribute the action of silence to nature, or in this case the most obviously "natural" component of human existence, the body that breathes air and through which blood circulates. Though Johnson's work is, generally speaking, devoid of personal reference or the pronoun "I," the human body is necessarily integrated into his poetic architecture as that which gives voice to nature. For Johnson, human beings exist as the consciousness of matter: a notion that recurs throughout

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<sup>11</sup> The exception to this rule is Johnson's 1967 *The Book of the Green Man*, which provides five pages of notes and annotations as end matter to the poems.

*ARK* but which is also inscribed in his earliest poetry. Key to Johnson's conception of the poet as one who speaks for nature is a quotation from Emerson's essay on Goethe that appears in the fourth section of a poem Johnson wrote in the early 1960s, "When Men Will Lie Down as Gracefully & as Ripe—":

'Nature will be reported. All things are engaged in writing their history.... The air is full of sounds; the sky, of tokens; the ground is all memoranda & signatures; & every object covered over with hints, which speak to the intelligent.... Nature conspires. Whatever can be thought can be spoken, & still rises for utterance, though to rude & stammering organs. If they cannot compass it, it waits & works, until, at last, it moulds them to its perfect will, & is articulated'. (*Valley* 49, punctuation in original)

Johnson actually quotes the Emerson passage twice in his poem, first as prose and then as verse, with the phrases "NATURE WILL BE" and "NATURE CONSPIRES" presented in all caps. As with the versified Levi-Strauss in "BEAM 24," Johnson chooses interlocutors who stress the importance of breath: the double quotation brings Emerson's "conspires" closer to its etymological meaning of "to breathe with." The poem ends with the sentence, "What hand will reach out to see the world?" (52), a statement of the synthesis of construction and perception that is at the core of Johnson's poetics. The difficulty of his task is suggested by Emerson's notion of the "rude & stammering organs" of Nature's articulation, of which presumably human beings are one. Johnson calls the poems in "Songs of the Earth" "translations and responses," attempts to articulate nature which require an effort—but less the effort of a master craftsman than the effort of a poet who submits himself to nature's "perfect will." The agency is transferred from the poet to words themselves: "These translations and responses might properly be called 'strains'—as in a strain of music

or poetry, but also those words & notes which strain their limits outward toward the unutterable” (*Adam* 65). For nature-matter to speak, the poet must in a sense be silent. And the concrete poems of “Songs of the Earth” are for the most part quite literally “unutterable,” even as the title insists on referring to them as “songs.” Consider for example the tenth poem in what another note of Johnson’s calls “*twelve squarings of the circle*” (66, italics in original):

*f a l l a l l a l l a*

l l a l l a l l a l l

a l l a l l a l l a l

l a l l a l l a l l a

l l a l l a l l a l l (76)

In his prefatory note to the sequence, Johnson glosses this as “All is at the core of fall” (65). But what seems like a simple and obvious bit of wordplay in the note takes on structure and motion in the poem, as the eye tracks the italicized letters that compose “fall” through the whirling “leaves” of the Roman letters that compose “all.” At the same time it brings to mind the Fall from Eden, and looks ahead to *RADI OS*, Johnson’s “treatment” of the first four books of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. That book-length poem is notable for its transformation of the story of man’s disobedience—the fall into history—into a quasi-Gnostic realization of immanent transcendence and the spiritual possibilities of the earth. The first stanza of “BEAMS 21, 22, 23, *The Song of Orpheus*” from *ARK* recapitulates the opening page of *RADI OS*:

O

Tree

into the World,

Man

the chosen

Rose out of Chaos:

Song

(*Adam 96*)<sup>12</sup>

Johnson's "fall," like *RADI OS*, turns a foundational tragedy into the material of something much lighter, in part by returning our attention to a natural world that is implicitly unfallen. *RADI OS* makes Adam consubstantial with the Tree of Knowledge, which is no longer the instrument of his fall but instead "conspires" with him to become the "Rose out of Chaos" that produces "Song." By jettisoning Milton's theodicy, Johnson brackets and suspends the Christian suffering we associate with the suturing of tree and man. We again recall Eric Selinger's observation that "At each point, Johnson has pruned his chosen texts to eliminate conflict, sadness, and historical pain" (161); this "pruning" is literal with reference to *RADI OS*, of which Johnson wrote, quoting composer Lucas Foss, "I composed the holes" (quoted in Stratton 25). At the same time, he wished to emphasize that *RADI OS* was a new poem, an act of creation: "Everybody thinks this is a great 'destruction' or whatever. And they're so surprised to find out that I made another poem. I really created a poem, but they expect it to be destroyed" (O'Leary interview 44). We might read this as another of Johnson's refusals of the negative, but it is also possible to read him against the grain as affirming the creative potential of erasure and silence. The "holes" in *Paradise Lost* are like the silent breath through which the new poem, *RADI OS*, becomes audible and visible. The story of "man's disobedience," like the theological implications of the Fall in "fall," is not "destroyed" but suspended, the felt pressure of a history of suffering—and the promise of messianic redemption—against which Johnson's ecstatic pastoral shapes itself.

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<sup>12</sup> Because the Living Batch edition of *ARK* is unpaginated, I have chosen to cite those excerpts from the poem that appear in *To Do As Adam Did* from that text wherever possible.

#### 4. “*Around a center // no one can see the end of*”: **ARK: The Foundations**

Johnson’s collaged and concretized Milton, as brought from *RADI OS* into *ARK*, demonstrates “the breakthrough compromise between collage and concrete” characteristic of the longer poem; as Bradford Haas has put it: “*ARK* was the full manifestation of the synthesis, at once a patchwork of quoted material that Johnson had collected, and at the same time a very physical presence, as indicated by the designation of poems as ‘BEAMS’, ‘SPIRES’, and ‘RAMPARTS’” (n.p.). The interaction of collage with the concrete in *ARK* is what helps establish our sense of the poem, and our encounter with it as “architecture,” as dynamic rather than static: the eternal present of its often visual construction is enhanced by the interpolation of others texts. For Johnson, the two techniques are not easily separable, as he suggested in a 1974 interview with Barry Alpert:

I have always been interested in changes of focus and the multi-dimensional, and toward that have used changes of spacing and capitals and italics and quotes and attempted to balance them as a texture, a woven thing. The history of collage has not yet been written. It’s central, I think, to understanding Eliot, Pound, Marianne Moore, W.C.W., and in other ways Zukofsky and Olson. All of them have used chunks and snippets, artifacts and re-creations, past and present, to put another sense of time and space into poetry. (78)

What is the nature of this alternative “time and space” that Johnson sees collage as putting into his poetry? One possibility is suggested by Johnson’s effacement of the “I”: as Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes of *ARK*, “The work is sounded, not voiced” (117). And:

The poem is a bubble iridescent [sic] tension between the andro-centric and the (we *would* say) destabilized universe of otherness in which we have a sideways place. (N.B. *we* are still there. We are judging, saying the word “destabilized.”) What is the syntax where this centering subject is truly dissolved? Johnson’s play with language as builded, with alphabets, with the visual weave and flux of presentation does a serious job of losing this consuming *us* as either centered or decentered subjectivity. (105, italics in original)

Johnson’s collage technique asserts a kind of democracy of statement, in which others’ language is held to be coequal with his own; as he wrote in his essay on Guy Davenport, “Collage is a means of making all art hold more different kinds of reality” (“Persistent Light” 40). The “centering” of the poem is in every sense formal: the centered lines that shape and orient the vast majority of the text. If the poem has a center, or centers, it centers as “sounded” and not on a particular “voice.” DuPlessis here discovers what we might call the “deep ecology” of *ARK*. Timothy Morton has defined deep ecology as “an ecology that could assume that a politics of the environment must be coterminous with a change in the view of those who exist in/as that environment. A poetry that articulated the person as environment would not invert anthropocentrism into ‘ecocentrism’ but would thoroughly undo the very notion of a center” (54). Just as Johnson’s voice is subsumed under the purely formal centering of *ARK*, so to is the human being made the purely formal center of nature, whose task is to listen rather than speak—or rather, whose speaking is predicated on his attunement to the centerless whole of nature: “The mind begins early to select from the buzz and humdrum, till most men end hearing nothing, when the earth speaks, but their own voices. Henry David Thoreau seems to have been the first man to re-learn to hear that *Moto Perpetuo* of the actual: the Greeks strung their lyre to the planets, but Thoreau

heard his stretched from first dark sparrow to last dog baying moon” (*ARK BEAM 7*, n.p.).

Johnson’s poetics updates and modifies Gertrude Stein’s imperative to “Act so that there is no use in a center”: the apparent stability of his centered lines is actually meant to achieve the sense of continuous motion and continuous present suggested by his phrase “*Moto Perpetuo* of the actual.” “The physicists tell us that all sounding bodies are in a state of stationary vibration”: humans are such “sounding bodies” which, according to Johnson’s cosmology, are as much made by sound as makers of it. “Matter delights in music, and became Bach” (*BEAM 7*). Here Bach is not the fetish object he can seem to be for Zukofsky; instead, Johnson puts forth the composer’s name to assert the boundarylessness of creative activity and construction as utopian principle. The center of *ARK* is the encounter with matter and the will to lend that matter expression. In so doing, the poet renders the lyric “I” inconsequential, and asks his readers to recognize in themselves their own constructivist potential as participants in matter, and as meaning-makers.

The figure of the “eye” as stand-in or replacement for the “I” is important to Johnson, as it was to his mentor Zukofsky. Early in “The Foundations,” the first third of *ARK*, Johnson centers his cosmology on the perceiving eye:

The human eye, a sphere of waters and tissue, absorbs an energy that has come ninety-three million miles from another sphere, the sun. The eye may be said to be the sun in other form.

.....  
.....

Though to look at the sun directly causes blindness, sight is an intricately precise tip of branched energy that has made it possible to

measure the charge of solar storm, or to calculate nova. It is possible that all universe is of a similar form.

.....  
.....  
Men have found cells sensitive to light in the hearts of snails.

.....  
.....  
After a long time of light, there began to be eyes, and light began looking with itself. At the exact moment of death the pupils open full width. (BEAM 4, n.p.)

One of several prose “beams” that make up “The Foundations,” the prose of “BEAM 4” proposes a total continuity between life on the cellular level and the light of the sun, subtly shading the language of physical science with metaphysical implications. As earlier Johnson would provide a quotation first in prose and then in verse poem, so does the following poem, “BEAM 5, The Voices,” reiterate his Spinozan belief in the fundamental similarity of “*that-which consumes and... that-which-gives-light*,” this time through concrete verse:

circ  
leci  
rle

o  
moon

*i n m i n d i n*

a e a e a e a e a e  
w v w v w v w v w v

eyeyeye

(n.p.)

The exploded “circle” of the sun passes through the “o” of the moon and in/through the mind, taking the form of a long “wave” made visually similar to the “eyeyeye” that receives it—a form of the word that magnifies its strangeness and materiality while “sounding” like an incessant iteration of selfhood: “I I I” (or perhaps more playfully, “ay-yi-yi”). Johnson here attempts to make the signifier behave like what’s signified: we do not read these words the way we read the prose of “BEAM 4,” but rather let their letterforms and arrangement guide our eye up and down and around the page. We survey, or study, or take the measure of these words, but we do not *read* them, just as Emerson does not “read” Nature but rather “conspires” with its own inherent articulation. As Johnson writes in “BEAM 11, Final,” “VISION is seeing as the sun sees. // ‘midway between the absolute / and man’” (n.p.). The sun here is posited as a kind of messenger or angel, partaking equally of the divine and human. To “see” as it does is to oneself be such a messenger. And to speak for the sun—to speak for matter—is to hear “the voices” and to be at home in the world of matter in a fashion that, for Johnson, signifies paradise: “Eden, glossolalia of light” (BEAM 14, n.p.). The pleasure of Eden comes from the poet’s Adamic ability to give many tongues to what he sees.

The intersection of the visual with the spoken marks out a terrain for Johnson’s poetry that is other to the ordinary idea of reading, just as the relation to nature it thematizes is other to ways of knowing that are analytical or exploitative. Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes it this way:

The worlds are whirring. This discovery—let us call it “Darwinian” to remind ourselves of that penetrating insight of nineteenth century science—finds the intricacy of the fittedness and poise of environments, traits, adaptations, colorations, charges, muscles, rock

texture, seepage, razor claw, two-colored hopping, fuzz at the crook of the stem.

Let this propose that a “Darwinian” sense of ecology is “thus” related to, implicated with the enormously mouthy quality of Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Hopkins, Swinburne—words presented deeply swarming with their interrelationships. Sounds so intense that they are incalculable. Sounds that if you drew them, mapped them, would make the picture of a fine, randomized, rich mesh on the page.

Let us call it ecological or echological: the logos of relatedness insisted upon through sound. (102)

Johnson’s “echology” is a form of pastoral insofar as it “insists” on a mode of relating to nature that is “incalculable.” It is “Darwinian” not in a cultural sense (in which Darwin’s theory was all too easily adapted as a new myth of race and species superiority) but in its sense of the natural world as a fitted and poised collage unified by sound and, implicitly, by human perception given voice by the “mouthy” poets DuPlessis catalogs. Again we are reminded of Zukofsky’s assertion in “A”-6 that “He who creates / Is a mode of these inertial systems” (“A” 22). Or, as Johnson writes in “BEAM 12,” “the labyrinth is its own clue. Our lot is puzzlement” (*Adam* 95). His kind of pastoral suggests delight in that puzzlement, a form of Keatsian negative capability: “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” At the same time, Johnson implicitly recognizes the possibility for anti-pastoral—for a destructive relation to nature, based on the desire for self-preservation—within the very structure of the human brain that he celebrates as “the artificer of reality”:

Both consciousness and the unconscious ‘collect’. It is as if some eons-old mind (in a time when it could do those things) cast the future on its cold eye, saw Plato’s cave, and became our brains. Where it will look with us—through ‘cavernous Earth/Of labyrinthine intricacy, twenty-seven folds of opakeness”—is what you and I are doing this instant. Still, beneath the frontal lobes, at the stem of consciousness, is that reptilian speechless gaze. Man is amphibian to oblivion. (95)

Though this statement of negativity, unusual in “The Foundations,” is immediately itself negated (“From the ape at my shoulderblade I see angels”), here is moment in which we glimpse the dark opposite of the sun “midway between the absolute / and man”; as the sun is “amphibian” to the divine and human worlds, so too is the human being a participant in what the sun represents and “oblivion.” Negativity is also obliquely present in the quotation from Blake’s *Milton*, a poem whose preface rejects the “corporeal” violence the poet associates with classical learning and “ratio” in favor of his own peculiar vision of Christian-artistic redemption and “Mental Fight.”<sup>13</sup> The passage quoted is from Blake’s description of the journey of Milton’s spirit from Eternity back to earth, where he will enter the body of Blake through his left foot and attempt to correct the theological errors (as Blake saw them) of *Paradise Lost*. The allusion reminds us of Johnson’s own rewriting of Milton’s epic in which, like Blake, he sought to “correct” Milton’s account of original sin by insisting that the natural world is infused with and inseparable from the human world. As Victor N. Pananen writes in an essay on *Milton*, “Blake sees the world as totally humanized, as a

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<sup>13</sup> “Rouze up, O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings! For we have Hirelings in the Camp, the Court & the University, who would, if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War. Painters! on you I call. Sculptors! Architects!... believe Christ & his Apostles that there is a Class of Men whose whole delight is in Destroying. We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live for ever in Jesus our Lord.”

mere sundial for that visionary foot: ‘all this Vegetable World appear’d on my left Foot / As a bright sandal form’d immortal’” (133). The quest described in Blake’s poem brings about “the improved epistemology of Milton, [through which] natural religion is robbed of one of its pillars, the belief in ‘nature.’ The church can begin to be reborn in Lambeth, and this vegetable world can cease to screen off Eternity” (136). By “the belief in ‘nature,’” Blake insists on a continuity of experience between individual subjectivity and what that individual perceives in the world: he erases all distinctions between innerness (*Imwelt*) and the environment (*Umwelt*) in his attempt to liberate humanity from the tyranny of a world conceived only objectively and empirically—the ratio encapsulated by the phrase “dark Satanic mills.”

Johnson’s respect for nature, and his enthusiasm for the scientific (particularly astronomical) apprehension of phenomena, stand in apparent tension with his adoption of Blake as the model for a poetry of imaginative vision. But Johnson has no need for mental fight with Isaac Newton in order to achieve his goal of refracting the empirical world through his romantic imagination: as he told Barry Alpert about the composition of *Radi Os*, “Blake couldn’t even look at Newton. I felt if I were to do this I would have to be a Blake who could also look at what we know of modern cosmology” (84). Johnson’s techniques of collage and concrete poetry substitute for Blake’s theological revisionism by placing language, subjectivity, and the things of this world on the same horizontal plane, with no single element dominating the others. Johnson is capable of writing “Ratio is all” with equanimity at the end “BEAM 25, A Bicentennial Hymn” (n.p.) while continuing to think of himself as being of Blake’s party. John Kingsley Shannon’s comparison of Johnson’s *Radi Os* with its Miltonic source text is illuminating in that regard:

Compare the visual appearance of Johnson’s poetry with Milton’s. One is of the age of Marconi, Einstein and Planck, the other of the age

which declared the earth motionless, judging heretical the works of Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo. Milton's is blank verse, metered, ten syllables to a line; complete thoughts in complete sentences; dense and weighty. Johnson's verse is hold together by the energy of an idea—by man's perception. (103)

For Shannon, the space between words that Johnson excavates out of *Paradise Lost* is filled by “the energy of an idea” that holds together a verse that is implicitly as modern and as true as Einstein's theories of relativity. As Blake rewrote Milton to create his Golgonooza—a world in which human perception is inseparable from both nature and the divine—so does Johnson rewrite Milton in an attempt reconcile romantic and poetic perception with the scientific discourses that frame his modernity. So too in *ARK* he can adopt a form from Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* to examine the fact of vision itself in both its scientific and imaginative senses:

#### A MEMORABLE FANCY

As I was walking in my Garden, an Angel in an apple-tree saw me, and spoke: *I drink the air before me* momentum a beam lighttouchstonearc seen after rain ray bright sequence innermost outermost band outermost innermost Aristotle thus explained the circular scattered incident magnified drop filled with internal reflections refract of constants at obliquely index two all directions quivalent significant axispassingzero tangent surface transmitted again split passages not ordinarily visible of angle illuminated at all impact simultaneously infinitely the vicinity backscattered toward sun through the center three grazes in its original directions so do they bend back toward the forward uni-varies most slowly with changes in other words gather together regions of

imaginary intensity in a sky filled with real waves. (“BEAM 17, The Book of Orpheus,” n.p.)

Johnson’s coinage “uni-varies” tries to capture in a word the diversity of perceptions—“regions of imaginary intensity”—and the inseparability of this diversity from the universe as we experience it—“a sky filled with real waves.” Blake’s poetry must efface the natural world almost entirely to correct what he sees as the errors of the scientists and theologians: “One effect of his attempt to offer imaginative vision rather than natural sight is, paradoxically perhaps, a radical simplification of his materials down to what communicates his vision and pays no homage to the deceptive natural world. As a result, conventional landscape all but disappears in his poetry, as do ‘realistically’ portrayed human beings” (Pananen 22). Johnson by contrast insists on the simultaneity of “imaginative vision” and “natural sight”: the “apple-tree” in which his Angel sits is a tree of knowledge in both the Biblical and Newtonian senses. Johnson’s pastoral solution to the dialectic of myth and enlightenment is captured in that “uni-varies,” which also speaks to the form of his poem: unified by centered lines that are nonetheless characterized by a centrifugal embrace of diverse materials, scientific and poetic: these different “voices” “come together in a centered movement where everything seam[s] together” (Alpert 81). The human being as a body of perceptions stands at the center of his vision of nature, yet impersonally so: *ARK*’s pastoral is not that of the egotistical sublime but rather situates the history of Johnson’s perceptions where a Wordsworthian pastoralist would situate the “I.” “The song sings the bird, and the crow the cock, and *it is not so much we who live as that we are lived*” (“BEAM 31,” n.p., italics in original). Or as Johnson tells Alpert, “I’ve come to think it is necessary to look at the outside world a long time like Thoreau and Emerson before entering the mind” (Alpert 80).

Nothing illustrates the imprint of the impersonally personal in *ARK* better than “BEAM 18”: the image of the author’s right handprint. A literalizing gesture toward Whitman’s promise that “Who touches this, touches a man,” “BEAM 18” places Johnson’s perceiving body directly into his poem, where the trace of its touch may itself be perceived by the reader. He answers his question from the end of his poem, “When Men Will Lie Down as Gracefully & as Ripe—“ “What hand will reach out to see the world?” (*Valley* 52) with his own hand. In some ways he is updating Charles Olson’s claim for poetry, “by ear, he sd,” as in the penultimate line of “ARK 35, Spire called Arm of The Moon”: “By hand, I said”; the hand as making/perceiving organ becomes that which “is need to give backbone” to the poem.<sup>14</sup> He is part of the natural world, grandly conceived as a cosmos, that *ARK* insists on placing the human being in relation with as part of an architecture conceived less grandly along the lines of the improvisatory scavengings of a James Hampton or Simon Rodia. This relativizing gesture—the shrinking of the human being so as to discover new possibilities of relation with a nature no longer exploited—is the essence of Johnson’s pastoral, and it depends upon a new, biologically centered relation to history. Or as Anny Ballardini has put it, *ARK* contains “the history of a man living in the 20th century who mirrors all men since the beginning of humankind right for the fact that man was given eyes, ears, taste papillae, touch and smell. The history of a man cleansed of all biographical or confessional elements” (n.p.)

Johnson’s handprint in “BEAM 18” gestures toward the “PALMS” of “BEAMS 21, 22, 23, The Song of Orpheus,” in which Johnson rewrites the Hebrew Psalms in a fashion similar to his treatment of *Paradise Lost*: “I take the Psalms, and

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<sup>14</sup> “Let sound lead the line.... If you abandon strict meter and end rhyme, something is needed to give backbone. I gathered it from Jonathan Williams who had appropriated it, with a satiric twist, from Charles Olson. This is what Olson means by “by ear, he sd.” Let sound gender sense. If you put your attention *there* on sound, rhythms, the intellect begins to have its play, and before (literally) you know it you’ve begun to *write*” (“Hurrah for Euphony II” 26).

my rule was that I had to have at least one word in every Psalm, and the words had to be chosen in sequence throughout the Psalms. The title of that was ‘PALMS’... In other words, I took out the ‘S’; I took out the snake [laughs]” (O’Leary interview 44). Here again we register Johnson’s desire to subtract evil from predecessor works in order to build his pastoral garden. Johnson gives us myth without terror—an elegant if simplistic solution to the problem of myth’s inseparability from domination as described by Adorno and Horkheimer:<sup>15</sup>

Out of the mouth of  
moon and the stars,  
What is man, that made him angels, beasts  
to a perpetual end: the gates in the gates of net hid  
snared in the turn into sight.  
:let them be  
imagined.  
moved in the secret  
ear to hear:  
bird to mountain eyelid cup

(Adam 98)

Johnson’s conception of the human being’s dual nature as angel and beast lacks any sense of the bestial: he transforms the Psalms—so often prayers for forgiveness of sin and for retribution against enemies—into “gates of net,” a paradoxical juxtaposition of that which opens with that which captures, or a net-work of openings that recalls once again the erasure used to compose *Radi Os*, a method deployed more subtly here. This open, accumulative network of relations only gets “snared in the turn into sight” (the sibillance here subtly recalls the subtracted snake) and must therefore be “imagined / moved in the secret / ear to hear” the micro-macro relations between humanity and nature encapsulated in the last line. Or as Johnson puts it succinctly on the next page: “:man / edge to the world.” The moral theology of the Psalms, which exalt the creator and find human beings worthy only insofar as they obey his law, here only exists as

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<sup>15</sup> C.f. “The Concept of Enlightenment.”

the raw material from which this new, eye-centric cosmology is formed. But while evil is removed from Johnson's "PALMS," mortality must be present in a pastoral that so insistently de-centers the spiritual in favor of what Johnson, following Blake, calls "the mind within the eye" ("Persistent Light" 38):

The north and the south  
in vision alter the thing for ever,  
void edge down to the ground how short time is:  
What man shall not see death?  
footsteps the years past, a sleep: consumed by number  
we have seen beauty in the secret place  
shadowwings A thousand thousand  
eyes in all ways.

against stone I will set sound.

(*Adam* 105-106)

Perspective—"The north and the south / in vision"—as a guiding principle is here linked to mortality, itself posited as something that man shall "see." Here and elsewhere Johnson hints at the collectivity of perception, implying that it takes "A thousand thousand / eyes in all ways" to see "beauty in the secret place." But he also seems to suggest that hearing is a more effectively collective sense than sight is: beauty here is "consumed by number" and reduced to fleeting "shadowwings," so that against what is visible (and the material from which one constructs the more traditional kinds of monument), "stone" he "will set sound." In other words, against the Ozymandias of stone critiqued by Shelley, through sound and the sensory Johnson will attempt to create what in "A Note" he calls "an Ozimandias of the *spirit*" (emphasis added). This move is foreshadowed a few pages earlier when Johnson writes, "not continually / beauty to consume like a moth: but of the clay, / ears opened from great congregation" (101). This suggests that "beauty" provides a fatal attraction for the eye, but that immersion in the less projective sense of hearing can come "from great congregation." Writing about Guy Davenport's book of poems *Flowers & Leaves*, Johnson quotes Samuel Palmer: "We are not troubled with aerial perspective

in the Valley of Vision,” and goes on to remark of eighteenth-century Cabinets of Curiosities that “This was the beginning again of seeing: with, and beyond, and within the eyes” (“Persistent Light” 38). There is a faint but unmistakable suggestion here of Johnson’s wish to distinguish kinds of seeing and kinds of listening as being more or less appropriate to his garden: collective listening and seeing in a highly focused and idiosyncratic way versus the mass “consumption” of imagery.<sup>16</sup> Johnson associates such consumption with death, with the moth drawn to the candleflame. But death is mostly pushed to the margins in *ARK*; only in “The Spires” with its elegies for George Balanchine and Louis Zukofsky, and the AIDS-haunted stanzas of the final section, “The Arches,” does death become a serious presence in the poem.

The work of “The Foundations,” as the title implies, is to provide a basis for the whole. It reaches a climax with “BEAM 30, The Garden,” in which Johnson, quoting Thomas Traherne’s “The Apostasy,” announces his intention “‘To do as Adam did’ . . . and build a Garden of the brain” (*Adam* 110). It’s to be expected that a poet like Traherne would appeal to Johnson: he has been accused of the Pelagian heresy which dictates that original sin does not in fact taint human nature, and so would seem in spiritual accord with Johnson’s subtraction of the serpent from his Garden. The apostasy described in Traherne’s poem is the fall away from an Edenic immersion in nature into the “customary folly” and “blemished eyes” of worldly cares, whereas previously, “My joys were meadows, fields, and towns.” “All bliss / Consists in this, / To do as Adam did, / And not to know those superficial joys / Which were from him in Eden hid” (\_\_\_). The phrase then has less to do with the Adamic task most

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<sup>16</sup> It may be useful here to recall that television provided some of the materials from which Johnson built *ARK*; as he says in his interview with Peter O’Leary: “[*ARK* is] just filled with snippets, things from books, things on television. When there was a good nature program on, sometimes I got a Rampart or two [laughs]” (33). But Johnson’s take on TV is here implicitly idiosyncratic: he references educational programs and not more popular shows, much less news programs or the Watergate hearings.

often associated with poetry—the naming of the animals and by extension the study of nature—and more to do with dwelling in the world (in “towns,” not alone) while avoiding the temptations of “superficial joys” that cause to appear “The sun / And moon forgone / As if unmade.” By situating his garden in the human brain, Johnson emphasizes the idea that dwelling poetically upon the earth means first of all dwelling within the mind—or rather the mind-body, another problem that Johnson solves by fiat, as in “BEAM 32, The Musics”: “Let the idea of man’s split brain be a grace note among the silvery Pleiades” (n.p.). The brain as organ of perception is central to “The Garden,” as Johnson once again makes his case for the close coincidence of the divine with nature:

The Lord is a delicate hammerer.  
 Gold hive upon gray matter  
 He taps synapse (“carrying to”) (“carrying away”)  
 an immense bronze pinecone moon-knit at the end of a vista  
 of sunny *jets d’eau*, silver poplars. All  
 shivered in a pool.

(Adam 111)

Johnson synthesizes the modern meaning of “synapse” as a junction through which nerve impulses pass with its Greek etymology, which translates as “point of contact” and “to fasten together.” In the very functioning of the brain, Johnson sees the active intervention of and fastening of human beings to the divine, and to each other. Both God and Eden are depicted as immanent in the brain reconceived as a garden and dwelling place:

Literally, a flowing: form-take-hand  
 -with-form  
 (That Which Fasteneth Us)  
 pillar to pillar the great dance arch itself through all that  
 is or was or will be, 3/4 time. This will be a glade  
 at the head of one stream

and a resonant gnomon before it will stretch regions of signaling  
 gnat-like resiliencies in the atmosphere  
 of where we are—  
 or were.

Or will be, when the mingled frame of mind  
of man is celebration.

(*Adam* 111)

Johnson, who elsewhere in *ARK* describes his task as “TO GO INTO THE WORDS TO EXPAND THEM” (“BEAM 28, The Book of Orpheus,” n.p.) surely intends “celebration” to echo “cerebration,” a word for thought that emphasizes the physicality of the thinking organ. The imagery of “BEAM 30, The Garden” conflates an actual garden with “gray matter,” figuring the brain as “an immense bronze pinecone” (conflating, once again, the human body with the form of a tree, and the form of his verse) and as “a glade / at the head of one stream” of perception that joins “regions of signaling” in a kind of web that will bring about the utopian “mingled frame of mind / of man.” “This is the body of light” (112), Johnson writes: an immanentist update of Pound’s claim that “The book should be a ball of light in one’s hand.” From here Johnson returns to the magpie architecture of the naïve artists by quoting Le Facteur Cheval: “*J’avais bâtis, dan un rêve, un palais, un château ou des / grottes / along the lines of sight*” (113, italics in original). These interwoven “lines of sight” (“Internetted eternities, interspersed / with cypresses” [110]) compose an “Elysian elision” (113): the collage of human perceptions that *ARK* is a monument to is the precondition for Johnson’s visionary utopia. Once again he stresses the difference between his constructivist monument—the Ozimadnias of the spirit—and the hierarchical, stone sort:

*flocons de neige*

I have attempted a temple as if hierarchies of music  
beating against time gone adagio, that is the Secret Pool we return  
to. And not to stone  
but to the world behind its human  
mirror.

(*Adam* 113, italics original)

*ARK* is not intended to resemble a stone temple; instead Johnson wants it be a living “human / mirror” in which a habitable world is reflected. “This is the way the word

begins, the world begins,” Johnson chants, recalling his original title for the *ARK* project, *Wor(l)ds* (Alpert 82-83). The concluding movement of “BEAM 30, The Garden” situates this ambitious project within the pastoral tradition, in part by re-orienting the reader in Kansas and the imaginary center of *ARK*, the pool of water near Minneola known as Jacob’s Well:

This is the way the word begins, the world begins,  
wrestling the old ineffable to Bosch’s amazing white giraffe  
—or St. Rousseau  
intent a symmetry of whisker.  
Love itself is a kind of *mirage* nesting it all  
together. Around a center

no one can see the end of at the Well of The Bottomless,  
I have placed parallels of bright guardians  
“along with the trill  
of the Nightingale,  
and the call of the European quail”  
as in The Pastoral.

(Signed) *THE GARDENER*  
(*Adam* 114, italics original)

The “human mirror” becomes the “*mirage*” of love (the word “mirage” itself being a hypostasis of the act of reflection) by which the disparate elements of Johnson’s pastoral dwell or “nest” together; love is thereby raised to the principle behind Johnson’s constructivism as that which synthesizes without erasing or effacing difference. That is the peculiar, formal nature of Johnson’s anti-imperial “center // no one can see the end of,” located at the “Well of The Bottomless” that Johnson has discovered in Kansas’ otherwise depthless landscape. But what are the “parallels of bright guardians”? Reminiscent of the angel that guards the gates of Eden with his flaming sword, these guardians have been “placed” along with a typically unattributed quotation in which are contained two birds and their calls: one, the nightingale, brings innumerable poetic associations with it, while the other seems most significant for bringing a voice that is both “European” and natural into the barren Great Plains

landscape on which Johnson seeks to build his mirroring monument. As they are “placed” by the author, the “bright guardians” may simply be the letters that Johnson imagines as self-signifying forms in “BEAM 28, The Book of Orpheus: “A is the fulcrum, I, the lever (eye). Out of it ray these three: LFE – single, double, triple vision: L I F E” (n.p.). Governed as the birds and their calls are by the verb “have placed,” the guardians seem to stand both outside and within “The Pastoral” that Johnson here claims to be imitating (“as in”). “Guardian” too partly rhymes with “Gardener,” the anonymous identity that Johnson assumes with his closing signature, and this returns us to Johnson’s stated desire “To do as Adam did” and stand apart from the temptations of civilization to rather “joy... in meadows, fields, and towns.”

##### **5. “Sparks in darkness”: Johnson, the Negative, and Nature**

Claims for the conceptual equivalence of language and its materials with the creatures and materials of nature are typical of modernist pastoral, but in “BEAM 30, The Garden,” Johnson displays a literary self-consciousness unusual in his predecessors Zukofsky and Pound. He implicitly recognizes that his monument requires “guardians”: even as he introjects those guardians into his pastoral structure, they stand on the boundary between his garden and a Kansas landscape that, as Johnson often insisted, is both physically and culturally unfecund.<sup>17</sup> The hint of negativity here is reinforced by Johnson’s references to Hieronymus Bosch and Henri Rousseau. Rousseau of course is another “naïve” artist, and the painter of haunting jungle and desert scenes in which the human beings, when they appear, seem curiously insulated from the violence of nature (as in his famous painting, “The Sleeping

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<sup>17</sup> “[A]s a child I lived in such a bleak atmosphere, it was so dry and hot, in Kansas, and it was hard to grow things. And I’d always imagined a garden, just a little garden, and I did manage to pave the back with bricks and things like that, but it never looked like anything. It always looked like I was in the middle of the prairies [laughing]. So I always wanted to make a garden of some kind and that’s how I imagine *ARK*” (O’Leary interview 40).

Gypsy”). Bosch’s “Garden of Earthly Delights,” with its gigantic birds and nude, pansexual human figures, is another point of reference, suspended as part of a triptych between panels depicting “The Earthly Paradise” and “Hell.” Johnson’s interest is in the detail, not the big picture—“wrestling the old ineffable to Bosch’s amazing white giraffe / —or St. Rousseau / intent a symmetry of whisker” (*Adam* 114)—an effect which diminishes the more disturbing elements of these artists’ visions (the “giraffe” features in the leftmost, Edenesque panel of Bosch’s triptych. But in the next section of the poem he again refers to Bosch’s painting in a specifically positional way: “Hieronymus Bosch, in the center of the Garden, midpath between maelstrom and rock of paradise, paints moth at thistle” (“BEAM 31,” n.p.). Again we have the focus on a small detail in a larger work, specifically poised between chaos and the “rock of paradise”—and we have already seen how Johnson wishes to distinguish his constructivist monument from the monumental stone of an Ozymandias. The delicate image of the “moth at thistle” is both pastoral in itself and a figure for Johnson’s desire to build a garden balanced between the “rock” of utopian thinking that shipwrecked Pound and the “maelstrom” of “a work with all history in its maw” (“A Note,” n.p.).

We can now begin to understand Johnson’s desire to write a historyless “structure rather than diatribe, artifact rather than argument” (“A Note”) in a new way, in part through recognizing how many varieties of history do in fact impinge on the poem: art history, literary history, natural history, and the specifically American history of Johnson’s bodily location as a gay poet in a Kansas that presents itself both as hostile territory from which to escape (Johnson’s frequent references to Oz, in and out of the poem, make it clear that San Francisco was his Emerald City) and a *tabula rasa* on which to build his monument with the tools of collage that he took from Pound, Zukofsky, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Olson. We may recall, too,

Johnson's claim to have chosen the Orpheus myth for his own: or at least sublimates it almost beyond recognition: "My central myth is that of Orpheus and Euridice, the blessed argument between poet and muse, man and his anima. Orpheus, who made the trees bend and animals one with his lyre. Orpheus, the beheaded voice floating downstream" ("A Note"). Orpheus is a pastoral figure insofar as he induces nature to become "one with his lyre," which he accomplishes not through force but through the intensity of his perceptions: "A man once set out to see birds, but found instead he'd learned to listen: an ear better unwinds the simultaneous warblers in a summer birchwood. There, he came upon an Orpheus, all marble, spiral shell to the ear of his Euridice. Turning the other way, he saw Orpheus again, listening to harmonies of midges in sun, the meadow like a nightingale around him" ("BEAM 7," n.p.). But Orpheus is also a figure of suffering, one who loses the resonance chamber that Euridice seems to provide (in Johnson's Jungian interpretation, that suggests being cut off from one's own unconscious),<sup>18</sup> and who is eventually dismembered by the maenads in much the same way in which Johnson dismembered *Paradise Lost* and the Psalms: disembodied but singing still. If Eurydice represents the unconscious for Johnson, or the Muse, the maenads may represent the social and historic forces that would destroy the pastoral-poetic relation to nature that Orpheus achieves—particularly the forces of normative heterosexuality which would have left their invisible mark on a young gay man from the provinces: "What footprint is left in the snow of flesh by an event?" ("BEAM 12," *Adam* 95). From this perspective, Johnson's extraction of the "I" from his poem may appear to be a pre-emptive

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<sup>18</sup> "Orpheus went into the underworld, which I take to be the unconscious, and there he finds Eurydice and tries to lead her out. But he looks back and he can't get her out.... This seems to me the Jungian idea that the male has within him the unconscious, which is the female. And that is the muse, actually" (O'Leary interview 50).

defensive measure: in a sense, he beheads himself before others have the chance to do so.

As evil, “the egg of S, the instinct’s serpent” (“BEAM 28, The Book of Orpheus,” n.p.) has been extracted from the poem, so too has Johnson seemingly extracted the homosexual body that can suffer, leaving us only with the visionary and auditory ecstasies of a head floating downstream. But as *ARK* is not a true lipogram, so does the S of the serpent and the body that can suffer and die make itself felt in the later sections of the poem. As mentioned previously, “The Spires” include several elegies, and also go so far as to mark the aging of Johnson’s own body in “ARK 58, Balloon on Being 50” (an echo of the commemoration of Johnson’s “(Mid-age. Brought to my knee.) / 1935-70” near the beginning of *ARK* in “BEAM 2”). “The Spires” is also marked by the motif of the lilac, a flower that recalls Walt Whitman’s elegy for Lincoln,<sup>19</sup> “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed.” As it happens, a poem of Johnson’s from *A Line of Poetry, a Row of Trees* not only makes the association with Whitman explicit, but imagines the lilac as a kind of transplanted dwelling place:

That I first played Ruggles  
expecting Lilacs,  
Portals, Evocations

of Whitman’s lilacs?

the Kansas lilacs  
brought fifty years before  
‘back east’

from lawns of Indiana, Kentucky,  
eighty years before?

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<sup>19</sup> A poem that, as Richard P. Adams argues, follows most of the conventions of pastoral elegy. See his article, “Whitman’s ‘Lilacs’ and the Tradition of Pastoral Elegy,” *PMLA* 72.3 (June 1957): 479-487.

the lilacs we played inside, they were so large—  
great prairie castles, of hidden doors  
& windows only outward—

*(Adam 26-27)*

“Lilacs, Portals, Evocations” is a poem of yearning and apprenticeship, beginning with the cry of a Midwestern epebe: “Kansas, of / sand plums & muddy rivers / from where I come” and quickly moving to invoke the names of his chosen masters, as talismanic as Dorothy’s ruby slippers: Zukofsky, Olson, the composer Carl Ruggles, “& Ives under Danbury’s / Maples, // are now ways homeward” (25). The young Johnson associates the atonal music of Ruggles with the capitalized “Lilacs, / Portals, Evocations,” and in turn with Whitman (though perhaps Wallace Stevens’ “fragrant portals” from “The Idea of Order at Key West” are also on his mind). Whitman’s lilacs, blooming in Brooklyn in the April of Lincoln’s assassination, are emblems of the tension between the events of human history and the progress of natural history, blooming in the face of political tragedy; Johnson puns them into “lyrics” associated with the high American art that’s inaudible from Johnson’s native prairie:

If there are lyrics  
grow in clusters, not ‘melodies

of five octaves  
apart’  
we cannot prepare

our ear for,  
I do not hear them here,

where no hedgerows  
but billboards, & even they lost in wheatfields,

in transit, always westward wherever we are,

from where I come.

(*Adam 27*)

The music of Carl Ruggles differs from that of Johnson's other American composer-hero, Charles Ives, in that it does not depend as much upon quotations from hymns and patriotic songs; it may also be significant that Ruggles figures as another of Johnson's naïve artists, as he was not trained in music theory. For the young Johnson who had not yet found his way to the techniques of concrete poetry and collage, the lilacs of Whitman and the "lyrics" of Ruggles seem to stand for the personal utopian possibility of becoming an artist in spite of the obstacles of geography and a degraded culture of "billboards... lost in wheatfields." The lilac trees in particular are poetic dwelling places, "great prairie castles, of hidden doors / & windows only outward"—a word choice that recalls Charles Olson's description of his comrade and protégé Robert Creeley as "the figure of outward."<sup>20</sup> From the metaphorical shelter of Whitman's lilacs, and a culture imported from "back east," the young Johnson looks out into a harsh landscape and finds the possibility of becoming a poet. But the utopia of the poem is an equivocal one: the speaker cannot, after all, really hear Ruggles' "lyrics," and the movement of the poem is "in transit, always westward wherever we are," out away from back east and toward the Oz unrealized of California. It is a rare moment of self-identification by Johnson as a Western poet, confronting the difficulty of claiming a tradition of innovative poetry whose centers—New York, San Francisco, even Black Mountain College in North Carolina (already defunct by the time Johnson began his education as a poet with Jonathan Williams)—are emphatically not located in the geographical center of the country, "from where I come." The literary flower shall become one of the building blocks of Johnson's poetic career, and of his prairie

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<sup>20</sup> The phrase appears as the dedication to Olson's *Maximus Poems* in the 1960 edition, which Johnson would certainly have read. Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems* (New York: Jargon/Corinth Books, 1960): n.p.

monument—"aft twilit lilac panicle / fathering rafter" ("ARK 41, Lot's Pillar I," n.p.).  
But what of the elegiac burden it bears?

In *ARK*, lilacs are often placed in opposition to or counterpoint with the barrenness of Johnson's Kansas upbringing. In "ARK 49, Masthead," Johnson recreates the experience of "some lazy Sunday / summer sermon" shut away from the outdoors to rehearse "ice / when fire is done, slow / fell furnace / forth us hence," and laments "(lost lilac, lit shellac / oak altar / due rude plenitude)." Johnson speculates about a spiritual alternative to Christianity immanent to the natural world:

shook out awful cuff  
(of what if)

perforce  
No Artificer,  
so absolute sway  
straw phantom clay?  
What mighty flaw  
make faith?  
That day

was Kansas

Ozymandias.

(n.p.)

Without a creator-god, "faith" is the product of a "mighty flaw." This poem, though speckled with glittering motes of nostalgia, quietly depicts a crisis of faith and a forsaking of the conventional notions of religion—the title, "Masthead," suggests the attribution of responsibility for a point of view. The last lines are ambiguous, as so often when Johnson invokes the name of Ozymandias: is he claiming that Kansas in itself is a sufficient creator without the notion of a god? Or is Kansas, home to "Poems plain / as Presbyterian pews" (n.p.) here condemned for its antipoetic "frown, / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command"? The parenthetical "lost lilac" suggests in

any case that the church represented in the poem is an inadequate dwelling place for a poet, and that an altar made of oak is necessarily inferior to an “oak altar.”

The poet’s mode of making is thus again subtly contrasted with the Ozymandian mode of more “official” utopias and heavens. In “ARK 57, Rungs II, The Gaia Spire,” Johnson once again claims the identity of a poet whose mode of making stands in pastoral contrast to the “absolute” ambitions of others:

Upon a time once  
placate how ultimate met daemon  
CALL ME  
ARTISAN  
pressed on to  
no absolute beatitude

sprout image  
against shaved grain  
led to the margins of light

(n.p.)

Johnson’s imperative “CALL ME / ARTISAN” recalls the earlier signature of “*THE GARDENER*” in “BEAM 30, The Garden” and looks forward to the conclusion of the penultimate poem of “The Spires,” “ARK 65, Windmill Spire”: “ATTEMPTED THIS LADDER FOR ST. JACOB / ASTRADDLE BOTTOMLESS WELL / R.J. FECIT” (n.p.). These signatures, reminiscent of Ezra Pound’s “ego scriptor cantilenae” (C 62/350), are a form of self-identification that exclude the personal “I,” confining the signer to the role of an “ARTISAN” (the word’s apparent modesty is belied by its being upper-case) who works “against shaved grain” and so operates from “the margins of light.” Johnson’s form of pastoral requires that he, as artisan, go against the grain of his native landscape, so that he both collaborates with and resists nature (the lilac, after all, is not native to America) in order to create a utopian vision capable of resisting “Kansas // Ozymandias”:

emerald, the front porch swing  
down yellowbrick road  
sun orange beyond the barn

— Tornado Rose —  
beings stept forth in geode amethyst,  
nor atom blue of dust lost

(“ARK 64, Rungs III, The Lilac Tree,” n.p.)

“The Lilac Tree,” here quoted in its entirety, is reconfigured as a “great prairie castle” whose “portals” open “only outward” onto an incomplete vision of the Emerald City, mediated by a new flower whose name of course invokes the catastrophic means by which Dorothy was transported to Oz. These lilacs are by the front porch swing, as Whitman’s stood by the dooryard, and so suggest both departure and loss. Yet Johnson, as we might expect, denies loss in the last line—“nor atom blue of dust lost.” If we associate “dust” with the Dust Bowl that Kansas was a part of, then Johnson may be suggesting that his journey to Oz can and must take place without his leaving the shelter of the lilac tree. “Atom blue” also suggests a miniaturized image of the sky, so overpoweringly huge on the prairie, the literal manifestation of Olson’s claim in *Call Me Ishmael* that “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America. I spell it large because it comes large. Large and without mercy” (CP 17). Johnson seems obliquely to register the fact that it may not be as easy to forsake Ozymandian principles of construction as he might wish. This is further suggested by the final poem of “The Spires,” “ARK 66, Finial for Ez,” which reads in its entirety: “so Ossa / pale upon / Pelion” (n.p.). This haiku-like poem ambiguously commemorates Pound as one of the Giants of Greek mythology, who attempted to storm Olympus by stacking the mountains of Ossa and Pelion on top of each other.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Johnson published the following note with “ARK 66” when it appeared in the January 1996 issue of *Chicago Review* intended to celebrate *ARK*’s completion: “Except it had to be sundown, I didn’t have for the Spires an end in hand. But head-on I found it *should* be the highest Spire of all. Then I remembered the mythic feat of piling one mountain on another, and I thought, yes, above they would also catch the last light. So shaking hands with Pound in the long classic dusk, I put the last Spire. Ez, as I remember him, hat on, waving his stick, reflected in a Venice canal” (20). Johnson’s intention is clearly to honor his mentor, and yet the placement of the poem, as his note suggests, serves to shed a somber illumination on both a poem and a man “on whom the sun has gone down.”

A rebuke to Pound's ambition is implicit in the reference, and in the word "pale"—but Johnson surely knows he has not evaded "shipwreck" simply by excluding history from his own long poem. Instead the final section of *ARK*, "The Ramparts," will be haunted by the deathly fruits of "instinct's serpent" as Johnson's pastoral impulses gradually yield to his more utopian ambitions for a world as glimpsed from the perspective of messianic light. In a sense, this movement was predicted as early as "BEAM 14," in which Johnson remarks, *pace* Aubrey Beardsley as Pound reports him, "Beauty is easy. / It is the Beast that is the secret" (n.p.).

In his study of Johnson, Dirk Stratton notes that the form of "The Ramparts" may have caused them to be the least appreciated section of *ARK*. Seeing them as corresponding roughly to the *Paradiso* section of Dante's *Commedia*, Stratton writes:

The relatively plain-spoken portions of "The Foundations" (which correspond to Dante's "rude" style for the *Inferno*) are no longer to be found, though familiar words and similar phrases reverberate. It is as though Johnson has re-collaged the collage. Unfortunately, the visual predictability of the final sections of *ARK* make them less satisfying than the constant surprise of forms found in the first two books; like Dante's *Paradiso*, which has far fewer readers than the *Inferno*, Johnson's "Ramparts" may end up being read far less often than "The Foundations" and "The Spires." (49)

The reader's eye is indeed less compelled by the repetitious forms of the "Arches" that comprise "The Ramparts": centered tercets without the abundant variety that characterizes the first two sections. But Johnson intends a shift of tone in the final section, and perhaps also, as Stratton suggests, a shift toward greater difficulty. According to Johnson, the three sections of *ARK* correspond to certain times of day as well as differing modes of perception: "Based on trinities, its cornerstones the eye, the

ear, the mind, its three books consist of The Foundations, of which there are 33 beams, then The Spires of which there are 33 built on top, with 33 arcades of The Ramparts rounding the periphery. The first book goes from sunrise to noon, the second ends at sunset with only Mt. Ossa set on Pelion reflecting back light. The third is a night of the soul” (“A Note,” n.p.). Eric Murphy Selinger picks up on this theme, writing that “*The Ramparts* overlook a midnight of the soul even as they show the ARK transformed into a metaphorical starship (all arrowed a rainbow midair, / ad astra per aspera / countdown for Lift Off, ARK 99 concludes)” (“Biography” n.p.). He characterizes the Arches as having “a sadder, darker tone” than what precedes them:

The Zukofsky *Spire* was set in sunlit summer, and artifice could stand as paradise; but in the vigil elegiac of these later verses a moment comes to click the ruby slippers and return to, if not bare Kansas, at least a more wistful mood. Many tutelary dead are mentioned: Robert Duncan, Apollinaire, Mallarm, Emily and Walt,” [sic] along with a figure named only in initials, who seems at once Henry James (“my true Penelope,” Johnson has called him) and the poet’s mother, Helen: like silver smiting silver / H. J. on the harp / behind order / Utopia cut figure. And, sometimes, between the lines, perhaps a certain sadness over the poet’s neglect by readers, the loneliness of his effort to extract the singing necessities from his material, and leave not a whit one mightnt want about. Along with Arches taken from Thoreau’s Journals and from various Protestant hymnals there is one, Arches IX, drawn from Van Gogh’s Letters. I have rented a house / yellow outside, whitewashed within / in full sun, the artist writes. Wishing to see a different light, / exile and stranger / I am dead set on my work. (n.p.)

Johnson's neglect by readers sat bitterly with him, but the darkness Selinger perceives in "The Ramparts" is also caused by the shadow of death spread by the AIDS crisis (though it is never directly mentioned), which had taken such a ghastly toll on the visionary company that populated Johnson's Oz, San Francisco. The opening of the section returns us to the dooryard of departure, literally dissolving the valedictory vision of Pound that ended the preceding section: "swung garden gate / (so winds spool the poles) / vase within vise Dissolved Mts." ("ARK 67, Arches I," n.p.). Not only are the mountains "Dissolved," but the phrase "vase within vise" suggests that Johnson's fundamentally Keatsian notion of art (beauty is truth, truth beauty) is under new pressure. This "feat of attention" prefaces a new effort to incorporate those who have died into the very loam of the garden that *ARK* tries to be:

cities cleft centuries' rock  
no angle of repose  
left to the imagination

uprisen inch  
concentric so of keystone,  
peak swallow peak

thus spake twixt cloud:  
*spade thou this cold ground*  
*to speed the dead*

("ARK 67," n.p.)

Something of the classic country-city opposition from which pastoral is composed can be felt here: the monumentality of cities that have "cleft" the rock of history leaves "no angle of repose" to the imagination. The effort of building an "uprisen inch / concentric"—a comment, perhaps, on Johnson's own centered lines, and the possibly failed dialectic between that formal centering and the more imperial centering that Stein warns against—recalls in miniature the hubris of a Pound who would set mountain on mountain, "peak swallow peak." The exuberant Gardener of "The Foundations" has set himself a grimmer task in "The Ramparts," planting corpses like

Stetson in Eliot's *Waste Land*. In "The Spires," there were seemingly no limits to what a poet-architect figure like Buckminster Fuller (the object of Johnson's veneration and identification) might accomplish: "Remove above. / Vault earth / devised, // at once / announce full / Arcady" ("ARK 53, Starspire," n.p.). "The Arches," though hardly somber, are pulling against stronger gravity, and *et in arcadia ego* is their secret motto:

Shadow about cast  
throughout fire everlasting,  
*mot d'urn*

feet plant moon  
consumed by such assumption  
needs must be fabled,

that the dead put breath to men!  
ripe for it  
the crowded years

("ARK 68, Arches II," n.p.)

The centered stanzas here suddenly resemble "urn words" as death becomes palpable, even death configured as that which "put breath to men," which reminds us that history begins with the memory of the dead. As Johnson wryly remarks in "ARK 90, Arches XXIV," "*here death shall have / narrow dominion*" (n.p., italics in original); much of "The Ramparts" presents the reader with his struggle between the kind of mad faith represented by the near-quotation of Dylan Thomas' poem and his desire to reside in nature as perceived, rather than resisted or exploited.

Part of the difficulty presented by these poems, aside from their Zukofskyan "highly compressed verse whose syntax is either implicit or absent altogether" ("Biography," n.p.) may lie in the shift Johnson is attempting from a procedure of eye and ear (or hand) to one of mind. There is a gap to be leapt between the dazzling,

expansive visions and musical playfulness of the earlier sections and the attempt made here to “wind... up affairs”:

errand at hand,  
over and above old periphery  
winding up affairs

astride all blizzard  
dive optical pool  
till intellect wed syllable,

acrobat of sacrosanct  
peel back the skin of earth,  
Aurora Borealis

(“ARK 67,” n.p.)

Johnson here seems willing to compromise the very constructivist principles by which he has built his poem thus far; put another way, he is attempting to achieve the closure that it is the very nature of collage to resist. His technique, of course, is simply more collage (Stratton: “It is as though Johnson has re-collaged the collage”): by paring away syntax within an insistently regular verse form, Johnson achieves a prosodic density akin to that of Zukofsky’s *80 Flowers*, turning the poems into opaquely beautiful surfaces. Yet there is still enough semantic content here to suggest that Johnson wishes to push constructivist techniques beyond play toward some kind of certain truth: when intellect truly weds the syllable, the “acrobat of sacrosanct” movement within language will “peel back the skin of earth.” In his essay of advice to young poets, “Hurrah for Euphony,” Johnson urges, “Let sound gender sense. If you put your attention *there* on sound, rhythms, the intellect begins to have its play, and before (literally) you know it you’ve begun to *write*” (26, italics original). Johnson suggests two other “paths” for young poets: reading books and “to simply see as much as possible.” In the first of the Arches, Johnson seems to believe that a deep “dive” into vision can wed the intellect to the syllable—a step beyond the “play” he describes in “Hurrah for Euphony”—and produce knowledge rather than simply arranging it in

new ways. His approach to perception through writing—by eye, ear, and hand—is intended to produce what in “ARK 68” he calls “innate theophany”: an almost Kabbalistic manifestation of the divine through “sacrosanct” acrobatics. To some degree, “ARK 70, Arches IV” thematizes the tension between pastoral and utopia, song and Ozymandias:

wondering where swim I am’s,  
 zenith Kansas  
 vs. eternal city

.....

taken wing, time being  
 a dream of stone  
 hinge wedge lever incline pulley

to build a temple there  
 without floor, roof candle bed  
 mind into window

(n.p.)

Doubt creeps into *ARK* as Johnson seems to reconsider the exclusion of the “I am” from his poem. He proposes a dichotomy: “zenith Kansas / vs. eternal city” may constitute a return to the territory of “ARK 49, Masthead,” in which “Kansas // Ozymandias” is opposed to the plainness of Presbyterian poems (that is, normative Christian ideology). It also suggests a view of Kansas as immanent horizon, opposed to a transcendental vision of utopia that carries with it the distinct whiff of Rome and empire. Johnson’s solution here is to take refuge in “a *dream* of stone”—to construct mentally what his own constructivist ideology forbids him from constructing literally (again we think of the distinction made in “A Note”: Ozymandias of the spirit). The goal of this thoroughly imaginary monument is to turn “mind into window”: the task of “The Ramparts” is to synthesize the sensory data of the first two sections (following Johnson’s “Note” we associate “The Foundations” with sight and “The Spires” with

hearing) into pure transparency of thought. In other words, where Pound and Zukofsky proposed differing pastoral ideologies, only eventually to retreat from them, Johnson's attempt to exclude history is an attempt to create a pastoral corrosive of, if not indifferent to, ideology. Yet the presence of death in "The Ramparts," the now-visible "footprint... left in the snow of flesh by an event" ("BEAM 12," *Adam* 95) pushes Johnson away from the ecstatic play of the signifier toward an ideology of his own, a powerful wish to negate the world in which poets are ignored, grow sick and old, and lose their friends and lovers to the ravages of a politically inconvenient disease.

And so history once again creeps obliquely into Johnson's historyless epic. He mourns Eliotically for Robert Duncan in "ARK 71, Arches V," calling, "to elevate the status quo unite / Replenish yr land, / nor diminish dimension" (n.p.). He weaves a shroud for Apollinaire and lays Mallarme's ghost to rest while referring almost bitterly to "both-blind Fortune & Justice" ("ARK 72, Arches VI"). In "ARK 77, Arches XI" he reflects on the limitations of his constructivist method:

steeped in makeshift  
"one that loved the sun  
and sent its root down deep"

bare record of the word  
umbilical, a fellow carpentree  
stand but in my head

too much, too soon, fast epitaph

(n.p.)

Identifying both with Christ and the cross-tree that bears him, Johnson worries that to have been "steeped in makeshift" may result in only a "bare record of the word" rather than the monument-vehicle he hoped to construct—if it can only "stand but in my head" his will be a "fast epitaph." He is, as he notes later in the poem, "swimming upstream to Messiah" and seems to question his own faith in the redemptive malleability of language in the absence of a self: "while soul practice nail // any stretch

of imagination— / to rise and cry out / like putty in your hands.” Though the poem ends with the vow “inVerse salvation,” the dark night of that “soul practice nail” remains evident, and the suffering of dismembered Orpheus—his “barbwire identity” (“ARK 92, Arches XXVI,” n.p.) is never too far from the surface.

Every time Johnson yields to the negative in “The Ramparts” he immediately whirls away from it again, as though scorched, back to the language of ecstatic perception. The recurrence of Christian imagery and the marks of suffering (at their highest in “ARK 78” through “ARK 80,” subtitled “The Hymnals”) suggest that Johnson at times shifts the ground of his pastoral from Arcadia toward pastoral in its religious sense; he seems tempted to invest himself in a myth of permanence and resurrection. At the same time he continues to affirm his primal faith in perception, invoking heroes like Thoreau and Emerson (quoting the latter in “ARK 81”: “give me the eye to see / a navy in an acorn”) and urging himself to “*Doubt myth of orchard / Shape new wholes / Alone, kindle known world*” (“ARK 97, Arches XXXI,” n.p., italics in original). “The Ramparts” are the most dialectical section of *ARK* because they take the most risks: Johnson’s desire for utopia is never more palpable, even as his suspicion of the means by which his Romantic and modernist predecessors sought that utopia intensifies. In “ARK 82, Arches XVI” he explains anew his method of bricolagic architecture:

exfoliate unfailingly  
rhyme as mortar  
always a little dizzy each step  
  
giddyap then here and now  
any-when or –where  
— the rest may be Jerusalem —

(n.p.)

Skin peeled away, “rhyme as mortar”—the image Johnson creates is that of a bared superstructure, never entirely stable, always in motion to “any-when or –where.”

Follow this procedure, Johnson seems to say, and Jerusalem will take care of itself. Again in this poem Johnson affirms the greater reality of nature as perceived by human who participate in its being as its own self-consciousness, so that it is seen, *natura naturans*, to build itself: “stones astonished light // decked boondocks.” Nature must have priority: the path to Jerusalem, for Johnson, lies in letting nature be and letting oneself be its perceiver—there is no other path to revelation or the divine:

The New Jerusalem

in paen to the elements  
uproot Apocalypse

.....

Lord set me on fire to say  
persistence primeval

now and now forever  
is all we know of Deity,  
undoubted beauty

(“ARK 98, Arches XXXII,” n.p.)

In another anti-Ozymandian formulation, Johnson declares, “Suspect the core / Suspend laid law / Surprise the end” (“ARK 88, Arches XXII,” n.p.). “Surprise the end” suggests both “surprise” as a positive value and a desire to sneak up on and perhaps evade “the end.” To “suspend laid law” means to be an outlaw, and Johnson shows a rueful awareness of how little his dedication to surprise and freedom may get him: “free’ll buy you nowhere / ‘a Florida adorable’ / if you don’t shoulder bounds” (“ARK 90, Arches XXIV,” n.p.). Homelessness too is an Arcadian state, and in these poems Johnson seems finally to identify more with the exiled Meliboeus than the contented Tityrus: “revenant, lost hearth / annoint [sic] renewal / Host of Makeshift, Inn of Sand” (“ARK 92, Arches XXVI,” n.p.). But Johnson sticks to his conviction that his bricolagic approach to Arcadia might actually yield to a utopian state: “if God there be to address, / read out *scrupture* / released planet’s snare” (“ARK 90,” italics

original). The imagery of *ARK* as a vessel, bound not for Ararat but for the stars, recurs throughout “The Ramparts,” culminating in the triumphant “Lift Off” of the final poem. But the coinage “scrupture,” which so perfectly describes Johnson’s poetic ends and means, renders that triumph uncertain. Having modeled his work as he does upon that of naïve artists like Rodia and Hampton, Johnson surely knew that *ARK* may finally resemble what architects call a folly more than it does a vessel of redemption. His more realistic goal might be expressed in the final lines of “ARK 92”:

mirrors turn to wall

goals into bloom  
in conscious, inexhaustible  
corner asylum garden

(n.p.)

Built from scraps of the Bible and Americana, Blake and the high modernists, the messianic redemption sought by this collager of collages with his subtracted “I” is ultimately surprisingly personal. The poet appears close to *ARK*’s conclusion as a small boy sheltering in what we now recognize as a figure for poetry itself:

cast forth plumed Death

in terrors of energy, elect  
sing Body Electric  
who trailblaze the mind

—only one small boy survive  
to discover universe  
an eyrie forever

then hold galaxies  
up 4th of July sparkler  
hid, O hid in the lilac bush

(“ARK 98, Arches XXXII,” n.p.)

Sheltered in and by the perception of nature, brandishing a sparkler as if to see by it, the boy’s late entry into *ARK* affirms Johnson’s claim that the poem would serve as a personal epic along the lines of *The Prelude*, though as Eric Selinger has noted it more

closely resembles “Wordsworth’s unfinished *The Recluse*: that gothic church to which the autobiographical Prelude was merely the ante-chapel” (“Biography,” n.p.). But the image of the young boy in the lilac bush presents us with what is in fact the model for *ARK*: a pastoral refuge within a nature seen as indistinguishable from poetry, from which the world can be seen, wondered at, and dreamed about.

*ARK* is intended to serve as “an eyrie forever,” a point of view. In “BEAM 8” Johnson urges, “perceive! perceive! Reality is ‘make’ believe”; a little piece of doggerel that naively, perhaps courageously rejects the cynical motto of a far more famous American pastoralist, Robert Frost: “Better to go down dignified / With boughten friendship at your side / Than none at all. Provide, provide!” The imperative to “perceive” versus that to “provide” sums up the two poets’ very different attitudes toward the world and its pastoral alternatives. Frost’s poems are really anti-pastorals, providing memorable demonstrations of the indifference of nature to human suffering and the indifference humans can show to each other when they live too close to subsistence. Johnson, for better or worse, stands wholly outside the question of self-preservation, so that the violence of history and the violence of nature seem to creep up on him unawares late in *ARK*. But that boy in the lilac bush, the self-conscious heir of Whitman, Zukofsky, and Pound, created something new in the genre of American pastoral poetry: a constructivist approach to nature and language that reconfigures both as inexhaustible resources, at least within the “corner asylum garden” that is also in “countdown for Lift Off” (“ARK 99, Arches XXXIII”). His version of pastoral ideology may strike many readers as overly simplistic, but in the context of an overreaching utopian modernism *ARK* may appear as a welcome tonic. It serves as a model for dwelling with and in a language as attentive to nature as it is to its literary precedents. It registers the pressure of history while presenting an alternative mode of vision that does not itself strain to become history, while remaining relatively

accessible to readers. And it demonstrates better than any other long American poem the power of collage to create a non-exploitative, deliberately underdetermined relation to the elements from which it is composed, coming tantalizing close to realizing a unity between traditional pastoral content and an intrinsically pastoral form.

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