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"NOTATIONS OF PROCESS OF MIND" IN AMERICAN POETRY
SINCE 1945: READINGS IN CREELEY, WHALEN,
KEROUAC, AND GINSBERG

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the pursuit of forms derived from personal experience in (late-) modern American poetry, with a focus on four significant writers of the 1950s: Robert Creeley, Philip Whalen, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg.

The study begins with a brief overview of the theories that most profoundly influenced these writers: Ezra Pound's Imagism, William Carlos Williams' "Relative Measure," and Charles Olson's "Projective Verse." This overview raises a central issue in American letters, a belief first expressed by Emerson, in "The Poet," that inherited formulations cannot adequately reflect or represent the truly indigenous writer's experiencing of a living world.

Pound, Williams, and Olson all experimented with open forms in an effort to document experience in its original energy. For the late-modern writers that centre this study, though, *Paterson* figures as the defining example of such experimentation, and provides a paradigm of the American poet's struggle to break free from the trammels of received, standard forms. A close study of this text reveals something of the aesthetic problems that the authentically American poet must overcome in order to make form new, the chief of these problems being the necessity to determine the place of tradition in contemporary writing.

Readings in the four principal poets of immediate concern follow the commentary on *Paterson*. Each individual

reading begins with an exploration of the author's poetics, indicating substantial connections with the theories of his main mentors or predecessors. Each of Creeley, Whalen, Kerouac, and Ginsberg has explicitly affirmed his belief that poetic form must not be preselected or predetermined, but shaped by the act of composition itself, from the needs of the poem at hand. A demonstration of the poet's theory-in-practice then follows, in the form of a close reading of a representative text from each author's production:

Creeley's *Hello: A Journal, February 29-May 3, 1976*, Whalen's *Scenes of Life at the Capital*, Kerouac's *San Francisco Blues*, and Ginsberg's *The Fall of America*.

As the postscript of this study indicates, the authors of these texts represent but a few of the participants in this major trend in American writing during the past fifty years. A brief overview of the theories, and some of the practice, of Paul Blackburn, Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, Gary Snyder, and Amiri Baraka shows that Williams, Pound, and Olson influenced many contemporary American poets, and that this preference for personal forms is not isolated to a few of the perhaps more widely-recognized figures of twentieth-century American literature.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: "A NEW LINE IS A NEW MEASURE": THE HERITAGE	29
CHAPTER 2: <i>PATERSON</i> : WILLIAMS' "PSYCHOLOGIC-SOCIAL PANORAMA"	56
1. Thoughts Interlacing: The Mind as River	59
2. The Park: A Poetics of Incursion	63
3. The Destruction of the Library	68
4. Book Four: The Run to the Sea	73
5. Three Decades of "Living Fiction": Book Five	78
CHAPTER 3: TRACKING THE MIND: ROBERT CREELEY'S <i>HELLO</i>	90
CHAPTER 4: PHILIP WHALEN'S <i>SCENES OF LIFE</i> AT THE CAPITAL: "BIG ZEN SOUP"	114
CHAPTER 5: "COMPOSING WILD, UNDISCIPLINED, PURE": IMPROVISATION AND KEROUAC'S <i>SAN FRANCISCO BLUES</i>	143
CHAPTER 6: TRANSCRIPTION OF "CAR BUS AIRPLANE DREAM CONSCIOUSNESS": ALLEN GINSBERG'S <i>THE FALL OF AMERICA</i>	171

POSTSCRIPT	
"OPENING THE FIELD":	
CONTINUITIES AND VARIATIONS	204
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 223

INTRODUCTION

Three influential communities of writers came into prominence in America during the 1950s: the Beat Generation authors, the Black Mountain school, and the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance. Influenced by poets like Pound and Williams, the authors associated with these three groups sought after an art justly reflective, in form as in matter, of the fact itself of 'experiencing.' Robert Creeley recalls the beginnings of this significant trend in his preface to Jack Kerouac's *Good Blonde & Others* (1993):

"Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" first appeared in the *Black Mountain Review's* seventh and final issue (Autumn 1957). I was the editor and Allen Ginsberg had just become an associate editor, joining Charles Olson and others. So the so-called Black Mountain writers joined with the Beats, and Jack's consummate instance of what his note proposes, "October in the Railroad Earth," appeared also together with Philip Whalen, Michael McClure, William Burroughs, Gary Snyder and Hubert Selby, Jr. Put simply, we all believed that whatever way or form of writing we might use, its most articulate means would be found as we then wrote, as we found then and there the way to say it. No precedent "form" or preconception could ever be there in the

same way.

(xi-xii)

Creeley and his contemporaries aspired to document the ruminative imagination, the mind pondering, observing, remembering; and so they rejected conventional modes of expression as being ill-suited to their enterprise. A growing belief in "the pastness of the past"—but *not*, *pace* T.S. Eliot, in its "presence" (Eliot 23)—encouraged many poets to set aside the decorum of iambic pentameter and ready-made forms in favour of an art shaped by and from the very energy of the experience expressed.

Not surprisingly, though, given the period during which these authors developed their poetics, their work was immediately and roundly dismissed by critics of well-wrought persuasion. The powerful New Critical partisanship of the fifties, combined with an oppressive sociopolitical climate, prevented many readers from approaching experimental poetry and poetics with either sympathy or open-mindedness. Early critics did little more than moralize the new-style writers and dismiss their technique as an indication of mere laziness, a want of craft. Criticism of "the Beats," for example, often took the form of polemical attacks against their bohemianism: time and again, commentators expressed fear and suspicion of ostensibly furtive Beat lifestyles and radical politics, while rarely undertaking to scrutinize the writing itself.

Political and social conservatism governed the appraisal by critics, many of whom seemed motivated by a desire to convince readers that the bohemian lifestyles of the Beats produced only undisciplined writers and, inevitably, bad and even dangerous texts. For example, "Howl" prompted Dan Jacobson to remark in 1957: "Now it is insufficient to say in condemnation that this writing is incoherent, frenzied, frantic, self-indulgent.... Apparently for many readers it is Mr. Ginsberg's very frenzy and incoherence that are to be valued, as a defiant assertion of the individual spirit in an ugly time" (477). The source of Jacobson's displeasure seems clear enough: "Howl" fails as a poem by reason of a want of moral character; by making attractive what Jacobson sees as an unsavoury and rebellious lifestyle, Ginsberg sets a potentially harmful example for the youth of America.

Even on those occasions when critics actually *did* undertake closely to examine style, they were generally unsympathetic, since most valued conventional forms and finely crafted closure, the "tightly structured lyric, distinguished by its complex network of symbols, its metaphysical wit, and its adaptation of traditional meters" (Perloff, *Frank O'Hara* 11). Traditionalists thus summarily dismissed much of postwar avant-garde American poetry as slovenly stuff—in short, as *anti-poetry*. Again, Jacobson's typifies the dominant response: "...the poetry in *San*

Francisco Scene is for the most part so remarkably innocent of rhythm, of a true feeling for the weight and value of words, of sustained thought, or of anything else that might go into the making of poetry, that one can only wonder at the prestige of verse, that it should still attract so many people who have no particular talent for writing it" (476). Jacobson's nicely turned irony at the expense here of work by Michael McClure, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Philip Whalen is representative of the acerbic yet genteel closed-mindedness that New Criticism tended to cultivate in postwar literary reviewers. Jacobson condemns the work of these San Francisco poets as lacking in finesse, because all the devices of rhetoric that "go into the making of poetry" (the statement almost cries out for the phrase "*good poetry*") have been shunned; the work in question has no 'proper' rhythm, diction, or unity of argument. And critics like Jacobson were in anything but short supply during the fifties and sixties.

"Howl," arguably one of the most significant and innovative poems of the twentieth century, bore the brunt of many an attack by critics who, vainly enough, attempted to assess its value according to New Critical standards, all the while ignoring the intention of its particular shaping. In an early response to the poem, novelist Michael Rumaker dismisses the work on the grounds of lack of focus: "the feelings are not precise (are an onrush of emotional bulk)

and therefore the words, the language, cannot be precise.... It's a 'bad' poem—it's not *said* right.... The poem does not contain itself" (228-30).¹ Rumaker roundly condemns "Howl" on the highly questionable assumption that there is a "right" way to convey the complex rage of emotion that fostered the poem, and on the claim (and a presumptuous one) that he knows implicitly what that way is. In Rumaker's estimation, "Howl" could have been "*said* right" had Ginsberg conformed to the prevailing aesthetic standards—had the poem evinced, in other words, self-restraint, containment, and closure of form. Rumaker's insistent claim is made with no regard (indeed, no consideration) for what Ginsberg struggled to achieve in the poem in terms of form. The poet's aim, in fact, was not to write a piece well-crafted in the traditional sense, but to record the "mind running along" during the creative act, to embody in art the "natural inspiration of the moment" (cited from Allen and Tallman 318-19). To create this impression of immediacy, Ginsberg required not the order of conventional metrics, but a more flexible, organic form.²

The militant attitudes represented in Jacobson and

¹ John Hollander's review of *Howl & Other Poems* is similar to Rumaker's in tone and approach. Ginsberg's failure to conform to New Critical standards led Hollander to scorn "the utter lack of decorum of any kind in [Ginsberg's] dreadful little volume" (297).

² See my brief treatment of "Howl" in Chapter Six.

Rumaker persisted in the early sixties, as did the unwillingness of like-minded critics to consider the work of new American authors in the light of another poetic. With the publication of his first major collection of poetry, *For Love* (1962), Robert Creeley became a favourite target of critics. John William Corrington, for one, had this to say about that collection in 1963: "Major poets have had few things in common, but richness of language and width of vision and expression are common between Shakespeare and Eliot, Dante and Dylan Thomas. Taking the question of language first, it seems to me Creeley manages to disqualify himself from contention almost at once" (107). Corrington weighs Creeley not only against Shakespeare, Eliot, Dante, and Thomas, but also against Jonson, Donne, and Carew—as though one could not earn the title of "major poet" in one's own time unless one measured up to the standards of the past. Using these 'greats' as a basis for comparison, Corrington goes on to argue that he finds little 'poetic' language and rhythm in Creeley's work, and ultimately concludes that it is substandard, suffers from "a banality of thought" (109). One might wonder about the validity of Corrington's rating system, given the stark cultural differences between Creeley's America and Shakespeare's England or Dante's Italy. T.S. Eliot himself recognized that even a poetry for all seasons must have a local habitation.

Even as late as 1973, we see Creeley mis-taken because his work is mis-sited on ground foreign to its production. In his article "Problems of Robert Creeley," M.L. Rosenthal laments what he perceives as missed potential in Creeley's *A Day Book*: "It could have become, I think, a rather marvelous sequence had the poet removed the dead matter, edited himself rigorously, and waited himself out. One thing he needed to wait for was an appropriate poetic line to carry the full surge of thought and feeling at peak moments along the way" (265). A more sensitive reader of Creeley's work might lament the missed opportunity in Rosenthal's experience as reader. Had he experienced *A Day Book* in the spirit of Creeley's poetic method, the critic might well have found the book more rewarding.¹

Creeley has argued on many occasions and in many interviews that his primary goal as an artist is to represent the world as he experiences it—as a process. He is not concerned with shaping experience into conventional forms or with fabricating closure where life offers none: not for Creeley a freezing of the world into a "final code of significance" (Creeley, *Contexts* 42). Rosenthal seems disappointed because Creeley did not create a sequence in the spirit of, for example, *The Wasteland*, a sequence in

¹ As Sherman Paul points out, the difficulty that Rosenthal experienced with *A Day Book* originates in his unwillingness to assess the poem on its own ground, a ground cultivated in part by Olson's "Projective Verse" (749-50).

which all fragments are orchestrated and controlled by an overseer of experience. Creeley does not envision the artist in that way but, rather, as a figure very much in the world, very much a part of its workings and processes. The intent of *A Day Book*, accordingly, is to image a mind's workings in experiencing, and responding to, the world. It goes without saying, then, that Creeley's spontaneous approach to composition implies the natural incidence of "dead matter." Not all observations and impressions cohere into a more or less neatly unified whole during the act of composition. If we take the poem as Creeley intended, we must accept that he failed to edit himself as rigorously as Rosenthal would demand.

The critiques I have cited typify responses to Beat and Black Mountain writers, and to poets of the San Francisco Renaissance during the fifties and sixties. This appetite for trivializing or dismissing experimental writings like *A Day Book* found ample fodder in work from Ginsberg, Whalen, and Creeley, because their methods departed so radically from the standards of New Criticism. In most cases, critics neglected the pertinence of different methods in their reading of individual works. Yet even when they attempted to address the matter of compositional immediacy in postwar writing, they still betrayed patent misunderstandings of how the author in question worked, and of what that poet had struggled to achieve. This response from Norman Podhoretz

provides a case in point:

Strictly speaking, spontaneity is a quality of feeling, not of writing: when we call a piece of writing spontaneous, we are registering our impression that the author hit upon the right words without sweating, that no "art" and no calculation entered into the picture, that his feelings seem to have spoken themselves, seem to have sprouted a tongue at the moment of composition. Kerouac apparently thinks that spontaneity is a matter of saying whatever comes into your head, in any order you happen to feel like saying it. It isn't the *right* words he wants (even if he knows what they might be), but the first words, or at any rate the words that most obviously announce themselves as coming from "life" rather than "literature," from the guts rather than the brain.

(314)

To his credit, Podhoretz was more open-minded about spontaneous writing than many critics of his day, more willing to attempt a basic understanding of Kerouac's "sketching method." Yet, more closely informed readers of Kerouac will immediately recognize what Podhoretz failed to take into account in his reading of this method. On the

evidence of his "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (1953), it is easy enough to suppose that Kerouac shunned artistic craft and calculation—easy enough, that is, if one assumes that he refused any but the "first words" that came to him during the act of composition. Yet, as Kerouac himself suggested in two long interviews in the sixties, his sketches were born of lengthy and intense rumination:

You think out what actually happened, you tell friends long stories about it, you mull it over in your mind, you connect it together at leisure, then when the time comes to pay the rent again you force yourself to sit at the typewriter, or at the writing notebook, and get it over with as fast as you can...and there's no harm in that because you've got the whole story lined up.... All of it is in my mind, naturally, except that language that is used at the time that it is used....

(cited from Berrigan 89)⁴

⁴ Kerouac also explains this process in his interview with Diana Scesny. See my treatment of Kerouac's compositional method in Chapter Five. "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" has misled many readers into believing that the author simply spilled words onto the page, with no forethought or artistic control. Recent studies have shown, however, that, strictly speaking, Kerouac's work is not spontaneous. See my article "An Apologia of Jack Kerouac's 'Spontaneous Prose' Method," as well as Regina Weinreich's *The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac* and Tim Hunt's *Kerouac's Crooked Road* (a close reading of the evolution of *On The Road*).

Kerouac was gifted with a memory that enabled him both to retain thoughts and impressions for significant lengths of time, and to edit these mentally (a childhood friend, Scott Beaulieu, gave Kerouac the nickname "Memory Babe"). In his method, all calculations were made prior to the act of writing, which act was for Kerouac nothing more or less than a transcribing of material already largely prepared and intact. The result was not, as Podhoretz suggests, visceral sludge, but a detailed account of the creative process.

Like Podhoretz, Michael Alexander addresses the work of postwar writers on its own ground, by comparing their techniques and poetry to those of their forebears. Yet, again like Podhoretz, Alexander fails to grasp the basic philosophy behind the methods in question:

To catalogue the forms of idiocy that so-called modern poetry may take, is beyond my strength, and would require a new *Dunciad*....
 But in Allen's *The New American Poetry 1945-60* there are some very idle writers indeed....
 Unlike their English counterparts, the non-academic American poets have too much to say, and say it over and over again, in the most sprawling way...; many of the "poems" are simply notebook impressions jotted down among mantic "insights," utterly lacking in the one remaining superstition of our post-Romantic poetics,

namely, in organic form, and consequently in
either beauty or more than partial meaning.

(64)

The focus of Alexander's forceful review is on the work of Williams Carlos Williams and Creeley. Clearly, however, the critic loses perspective; what begins as modest praise for these two writers (for Williams in particular) descends into a polemical attack on contemporary American poetry in general. The critic's specific peeve is with the craft of postwar writers influenced by Williams, with (what Alexander calls) "the sins of his alleged disciples" (64). From a glance, the critic purports to see in the work of Williams conscious artistic craft and self-restraint, and in the work of the poets of Donald Allen's signal anthology an utter lack of both discipline and art. He censures what he calls idleness in postwar poets, though his reading of their theory and work is cursory and superficial at best. Some of Williams' works, for example, could themselves be labelled "notebook impressions," especially the short lyric "This is Just to Say" and parts of *Paterson*. Yet just because a piece appears to be a spontaneous notebook jotting does not mean that it is *just* that, nor does a cursory glance at a poem make the case that no craft went into its making.

Further, Alexander's claim that the poems in Allen's anthology suffer from a want of organic form seems a little confusing, perhaps even careless. What qualifies as work

written in organic form for Alexander if "notebook impressions" (records of the raw data of thought) do not? Could we not also argue, using Alexander's line of approach, that Williams' *Paterson* is written "in the most sprawling way," with no apparent strategy? And could we not then conclude that it too was lacking in organic form? Like Podhoretz, Alexander mistakes open forms and calculated representations of the creative process in art for exercises in laziness and sloppiness. Such close analysis of theories and manifestoes as provided in the chapters that follow will make it clear enough that Williams' "disciples" *did* edit their work as part of the very process of its experiencing: a mind has its own grammar and craft. And as we shall see, the aim and achievement of those disciples were not so different from those of their mentor.⁵

While such misunderstandings persisted into the late sixties and early seventies, critics generally became much more receptive to the poetics of writers like Creeley, Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Whalen. Perhaps as a result of

⁵ In this brief overview of the early criticism, I do not mean altogether to devalue New Criticism or its followers, nor do I mean to propose sketches for a new *Dunciad*. To a certain extent, the closed-mindedness exhibited towards postwar work is understandable. Critics had, after all, no appropriate critical system by which to evaluate such new, radically innovative writers. And so, when poets like Creeley, Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Whalen published work diametrically opposed to the standards and values of New Criticism, it is not surprising that, to them, such work seemed tawdry, banal, or just plain bad.

having been exposed to the more radical experiments of Postmodernism, critics seemed better equipped to deal with the aims of these writers, to assess their work as products of open-form poetics. In his detailed study of Kerouac's "Essentials," for example, George Dardess argues that the "logic of 'spontaneous prose'" is grounded in a desire to record emotional and physiological responses to an event or a specific environment (736). A diner, for example, elicits an emotional response in the author, a desire to examine his surroundings in detail—an icebox, butter pats, a grill. As the viewer becomes more involved, his emotions intensify, build or expand toward a kind of release and exhaustion. Dardess tracks this "rhythmic pattern ... of expansion, climax, and exhaustion" in Kerouac's prose, using two lengthy passages from *Visions of Cody* as salient examples (734).

Critics in the seventies were generally more sympathetic to the work of Robert Creeley as well. Unlike many of his early readers, commentators like Charles Altieri, Cynthia Dubin Edelberg, Robert Kern, and John Vernon sensitively responded to the central issues of Creeley's poetics. In his essay "Composition as Recognition: Robert Creeley and Postmodern Poetics" (1978), Robert Kern describes Creeley as a writer who views the poem as an "extension" of immediate experience. His study addresses the influence of Olson's "Projective Verse" on

Creeley's poetics—that is to say, on the latter's rejection of predetermined form in favour of an art derived from "the shape of what has happened" (216). John Vernon takes a similar perspective on Creeley's early work, describing it as the embodiment of "the gesture that gave rise to the words, the cry of their occasion" (310).

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the widespread critical acclaim that postwar avant-garde poets have garnered for themselves is in the growing number of comprehensive, book-length studies of their achievement. James Breslin, for one, in his *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945-1965* (1984), analyzes the transformation from the Symbolist poetics of the Modernists to the quest of avant-garde writers after 1945 "for poetic forms that could capture temporal immediacy." An "historical thesis," Breslin's work examines one figure from each of five postwar "schools" (xv). Breslin locates key works of individual authors within the context of various stages of their artistic development: he sketches, for example, the development of Ginsberg as a poet from the late forties to the early fifties, gauging the shift in style from the author's 'visionary' work to his poetry of the 'mundane.' Breslin cites Ginsberg's developing interest in the work of Williams as a key factor in this transition, and then attempts to demonstrate that "Howl" is a fusion of these two early styles.

Charles Altieri, for another, in his *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry During the 1960s* (1979), distinguishes between High Modernist and Postmodernist poetics. The Modernists, he argues, view the act of writing as a commitment to "constructing coherent, fully human forms out of the flux of experience": the ultimate goal of the Modernist is to recreate "a believable image of ideal human order" (17). Postmodernist poets, on the other hand, are concerned not with transforming nature into "satisfying human structures," but with rendering their quest to discover meaning in the natural order of things—not "the structuring of an event by a responding, interpreting mind," but the embodiment of experience itself (96). Altieri defines Postmodern theorizing as "an aesthetics of presence," and submits that the subjects of his study (poets like Robert Lowell, Charles Olson, Gary Snyder, W.S. Merwin, and Denise Levertov) perceive the creative act as an entering into, but not a controlling of, the vital forces of existence.⁶

Competent, genuinely instructive analyses have also been written on the individual 'schools' of postwar poetry—

⁶ Other studies of postwar poetry include Ekbert Faas' *Towards a New American Poetics: Essays and Interviews* (1978) and Richard Howard's *Alone With America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950* (1980), both of which include essays on the development of poets after 1945. Although these two works do not examine postwar poetry in great detail, they are sensitive and perceptive readings of writers like Creeley, Ginsberg, and Snyder.

Martin Duberman's *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (1972), John Tytell's *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (1976), and Edward Foster's *Understanding the Beats* (1992) figure among the many that must come to mind. One of the finest monographs on any single postwar school of poetry is Michael Davidson's *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century* (1989), which considers such leading writers of the fifties and sixties as Ginsberg, Kerouac, Snyder, Whalen, and Duncan. Davidson examines the craft of these writers and their place in an artistic community, using telling examples of their work to illustrate his discussion.¹ In addition to these excellent group-studies, justly attuned readings have recently been done on the poetry and poetics of some of the individual authors addressed in the present study. These include Cynthia Dubin Edelberg's *Robert Creeley's Poetry: A Critical Introduction* (1978), Paul Portugés' *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* (1978), and Regina Weinreich's *The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac* (1987).

Like any work of criticism, of course, all of these studies have their limitations, some of which are addressed in my thesis. Admittedly, I have never found surveys or

¹ The inclusion of Kerouac in this work is somewhat odd, not merely because he is generally associated with the Beats, but also because the study is not of Kerouac's poetry, but of *Visions of Cody*.

overviews of literary trends and periods particularly instructive reading. One may indeed gain a sense of the wide variety of styles and techniques of contemporary American verse from Howard's book; and yet his readings of individual writers often lack depth (unavoidably perhaps: Howard examines forty-one poets in the enlarged edition). The single-author studies I cite above are much more comprehensive in their treatment of both poetry and poetics. Yet, where studies like *Alone With America* are too broad in scope to provide detailed readings of any one writer, analyses like Weinreich's or Tytell's rarely touch on the strong sense of community that subtends much postwar American poetry.

Like Breslin and Altieri, then, I have chosen to restrict my scope to a few key figures from what I see as the most important schools of contemporary American verse, in the belief that such an approach affords an understanding of community founded on a close reading of particulars. Breslin, though, focuses not on this sense of community, but on the variety and diversity of styles and techniques in contemporary American poetry. Rather than stressing the differences between the major groups of writers, I am more interested in what brings them together, the commonality in influence and method. And my study differs from Altieri's, which concerns itself more with matters of philosophy. The present thesis focuses more on the art of writing, and on

authors—four of them—whose productions indicate a closely shared approach to the poet's craft. Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg are two of the seminal authors of the Beat Generation (Kerouac's "Essentials" and Ginsberg's numerous essays and statements on writing were crucial for Robert Duncan, Gary Snyder, and Robert Creeley, among others), while Creeley was influential in his own way, his early correspondence with Charles Olson being instrumental in the formulation of "Projective Verse." From the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, I have chosen Philip Whalen, since his definition of his poetry as "a picture or graph of a mind moving" (cited from Allen 420) was touted by many of his contemporaries (most notably Allen Ginsberg) as one of the most definitive statements on open verse. I have selected these four writers in particular not merely because they are significant in the history of American letters, but also because they have all cited, in interviews and essays, the same key poets (Pound, Olson and, especially, Williams) as influences on their craft, a fact which invites us to draw connections between their individual theories.

In many cases, critics have focused only on the best known texts of these poets. For example, critics of Ginsberg have focused for the most part on the period of his juvenilia, work predating "Howl." This is the case, for example, in Breslin's study. Where Creeley is concerned, critics tend to focus on his first three major collections:

For Love (1962), *Words* (1967), and *Pieces* (1969). Studies of Kerouac's and Whalen's poetry are even scarcer. Whalen's work has received virtually no critical attention, which neglect can perhaps be explained in part by the fact that he publishes only sporadically.⁸ Yet his work has earned him a great deal of respect among his contemporaries, to which fact his participation in the famous Six Gallery reading (7 October 1955), in the Vancouver Poetry Conference (1963), and in the visiting poets' lecture series at the Naropa Institute clearly attests (1976).⁹ While many of Kerouac's major works of fiction have recently been the subject of close study, his poetry remains virtually unconsidered. This is perhaps explainable by the fact that Kerouac published only one volume of poetry in his lifetime, and by the ongoing legal problems with his estate, which have made

⁸ Since *On Bear's Head* (1969), a substantial body of work selected from his small, early volumes, Whalen has published only six major collections of poetry: *Severance Pay: Poems 1967-1969* (1970), *Scenes of Life at the Capital* (1971), *The Kindness of Strangers: Poems, 1969-1974* (1976), *Decompressions: Selected Poems* (1977), *Enough Said: Fluctuat Nec Mergitur: Poems 1974-1979* (1980), and *Heavy Breathing: Poems 1967-1980* (1983).

⁹ Michael McClure and Robert Creeley, in addition to Allen Ginsberg, have likewise cited Whalen as a significant poet of the postwar avant-garde. Recalling the Six Gallery reading, McClure praises Whalen's process poetry (*Scratching the Beat Surface* 21). Creeley has characterized Whalen's art as a representation of a man "engaged ... in thinking himself," of a man "wandering around in a battle area with the constant question, *what's happening*" (*Collected Essays* 174).

the main body of his verse inaccessible until only recently.¹⁰ In an effort to expand the field of study on these poets, I have therefore selected relatively recent and sorely neglected texts: Creeley's *Hello: A Journal*, February 29-May 3, 1976, Whalen's *Scenes of Life at the Capital*, Kerouac's *San Francisco Blues*, and Ginsberg's *The Fall of America: Poems of These States 1965-1971*. In each case, I have chosen a process poem, in the belief that it is in this particular mode that these authors have found the expression most congenial to their theories.

I begin my study by examining the theories and manifestoes that influenced these works. Chapter One focuses on the artistic sources common to all four of my chosen writers. Their techniques were nurtured by Whitman's Emersonianly-spirited preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855), Pound's *Make It New* (1934), Williams' theory of "Relative Measure," and Olson's "Projective Verse" (1950). In his seminal essay "The Poet" (1844), Emerson challenged American writers to abandon modes of expression transplanted from Europe, and to create poetic forms naturally fitted to their

¹⁰ Grove Press published *Mexico City Blues* in 1959. Two slim volumes of Kerouac's poetry were released in the seventies: *Scattered Poems* (1971) and *Heaven & Other Poems* (1977). These two collections consist largely of poems published in small periodicals at various times throughout the author's life. *Pomes All Sizes* (1992) is the most comprehensive collection of Kerouac's "scattered" poems. The author's legendary *Book of Blues* was not published in its entirety until 1995.

local habitation. Whitman was the first to rise to Emerson's challenge. In his preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman both negated conventional, European modes of expression, and petitioned for forms derived from the poet's experiencing of America.

With their concerns for developing a national literature, Emerson and Whitman laid a foundation upon which poets of the twentieth century built. Following my discussion of what are almost surely the seminal theories of compositional immediacy in American literature, I briefly examine the poetics of Pound and Williams, both of whom substantially influenced the authors of my study. Both of these Modernist poets saw Whitman as a flawed, undisciplined writer, but they also acknowledged that his sense of what a genuinely American imagination might do represented a model for revitalizing poetry. In part from the example of Whitman, and from a shared concern for documenting in art the "drama of human consciousness," Pound and Williams insisted on "addressing experience without the mediation of predetermined form" (Kartiganer 298, 301). They believed that their experiences could not be precisely rendered in inherited formulations, and that they therefore required forms derived from "the thoughts and speech of a living world" (Williams, "Measure" 132).

Charles Olson assimilated the theories of Pound and Williams into his own manifesto, "Projective Verse."

Although not as significant to the overall development of postwar poetry as Williams' theory of "Relative Measure," Olson's manifesto and his leadership at Black Mountain College were nevertheless vital to the development of poets in the fifties, among them Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, and Robert Duncan. In my overview of "Projective Verse," I examine Olson's main tenets, with special emphasis on his theory of "field composition" (*Selected Writings* 16), and on those points where his sense of poetry intersects with the poetics of Pound and Williams.

Having laid the groundwork of the poetics upon which all of the postwar poets of my study constructed their own models of composition, I proceed to an examination of Williams' magnum opus, *Paterson* (1946-1958). Of all the authors who influenced the writers of the fifties, Williams had the most lasting effect on their methods and work. An eager and tireless mentor and confidante, he involved himself directly in the lives of Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Philip Whalen, and Gary Snyder, offering the guidance they needed at critical stages in their development. The elder poet's numerous essays and experiments in verse form touched many a contemporary American poet in one way or another. And all of the writers on whom this study focuses have acknowledged *Paterson's* profound effect on their work. An experiment in open-form poetics significant as much for its intrinsic as

for its historical value, *Paterson* documents one American poet's struggle to break free from the trammels of received, standard form. Close study of the five books of Williams' epic reveals the difficulties that the American poet must overcome in order to create forms consonant with his/her time, chief of which is the necessity of determining the place of tradition in contemporary writing.

Subsequent to this analysis, I devote one chapter to each of Creeley, Whalen, Kerouac, and Ginsberg. I begin each individual study with an exploration of the author's poetics, by indicating substantial connections with the theories of his predecessors. I then attempt to demonstrate the theory-in-practice by performing a close reading of a representative text from each writer's production.

The theories most influential in Creeley's early development as a writer were adapted from Williams and Olson. While living in New Hampshire in 1950, Creeley began a regular correspondence with the leader of the Black Mountain group. These letters provided the young writer with a valuable source of information, as well as a forum for debating what both poets considered to be the central issues of contemporary poetry. Creeley's dictum "Form is never more than an extension of content" emerged from this exchange of ideas, and has been the guiding principle behind his writing for some forty years. In my study, I examine the extent to which the subject matter of *Hello* dictates its

form. The book takes the form of a journal, a personal record of Creeley's 1976 reading tour in the South Pacific. A chronological sequence of poems and notations serves as the structural framework within which a mental process plays out—in this case, a process of, and for, self-redefinition.

I have selected *Scenes of Life at the Capital* in the belief that it is the strongest example of Whalen's commitment to writing as "a picture or graph of a mind moving." *Scenes of Life* chronicles Whalen's second trip to Japan, 1969-71, a time of significant change in his life. The growing animosity that the poet felt towards Western civilization and America during the sixties prompted him to enter into Zen Buddhism. *Scenes of Life* signs the dialectical tension in the mind of its author as he turns away from his home culture to embrace an Eastern spirituality. Whalen interweaves memories of his childhood and friends with observations of his immediate surroundings to enact his rite of passage.

Having focused, in chapters Three and Four, on one representative poet from each of the Black Mountain school and the San Francisco Renaissance, I turn, in chapters Five and Six, to the Beat Generation, beginning with an analysis of Jack Kerouac's *San Francisco Blues*. I have selected this work for special attention because it exemplifies how Kerouac applied his "Spontaneous Prose" method to verse. As his *"Essentials"* makes explicit, jazz improvisation figures

prominently in his compositional method. Like the jazz musician, Kerouac first establishes a 'theme' (often a scene or detail observed), then follows the responses that it prompts in a "free deviation" comparable to an improvisation on that theme (*Good Blonde* 69). Each individual piece in *San Francisco Blues*—Kerouac calls them "blues choruses" (*Book of Blues* 1)—provides a track of the poet's emotional impulses and intellectual responses during his performance in words.

I have chosen to complete my study with an analysis of *The Fall of America* for two reasons. First, Ginsberg has maintained many close friendships with poets from all three of the schools I touch on in my thesis. These connections provided him with a valuable avenue of discourse on contemporary techniques of writing. Secondly, Ginsberg shares many interests held by other postwar writers. The author has experimented extensively with compositional immediacy in his poetry. Influenced by Kerouac in the early fifties, Ginsberg developed his own theory of spontaneous writing for "Howl." Throughout his career, he has written many poems under the influence of narcotics, in an attempt to document the mind during sustained, drug-induced states of awareness. In addition, his interest in Buddhism (developed early in his career) became influential on his art when he began Zen training in 1971, under the guidance of Tibetan lama Chögyam Trungpa. Like Whalen and Snyder,

Ginsberg adopted Buddhism not merely as a way of life, but as a means of attaining enhanced 'mindfulness' in the process of writing. Also in 1971, the poet recorded a blues album with Bob Dylan. Ginsberg was struck by the similarity between blues as a spontaneous, emotional outpouring in music and his perception of poetry as "Notations of process of mind" (*Indian Journals* 93).

Dylan was influential on Ginsberg's work in another, perhaps even more significant, way. In 1965, the musician gave Ginsberg enough money to buy a Uher tape recorder, which he used to compose most of his poetry for the next five years, including the poems of *The Fall of America*. Like Creeley's *Hello*, *The Fall of America* is largely a 'road poem,' a chronicle of the poet's travels across America between 1965 and 1971. The frenetic pace of several cross-country trips provides a kinetic framework for an unfolding process of observation and reflection on the state of the nation.

With this study, I do not mean to suggest, of course, that these four writers alone shaped contemporary American poetry. In fact, as I suggest in my postscript, interest in open form and compositional immediacy dominated the postwar avant-garde. Primarily, it is my goal to demonstrate how certain American authors of the twentieth century responded to the example of their predecessors, and how they parleyed their interest(s) in personal forms into methods for

capturing the artistic mind in the process of creation. My discussion of the compositional theories may occasionally seem somewhat repetitive. In dealing with authors whose notions of writing are so alike and who draw on each other's theories and statements when discussing their own work, however, some degree of repetition is unavoidable. One could suggest that it is even necessary in order to show how like-minded the members of these loose communities of writers were, and to show how widespread were the desires of postwar American poets to represent the genuinely creative activity that is an authentic art.

CHAPTER 1

"A NEW LINE IS A NEW MEASURE": THE HERITAGE¹¹

In a 1972 interview with Yves LePellec, Allen Ginsberg reconstructs a major line of development in twentieth-century American poetics, "the whole poetic movement he had been associated with since the 40s" (Ginsberg, *Composed on the Tongue* 63):

... the transmission of consciousness and ideas through time was already a heavy element in the original literary activity we were concerned with, in that Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen met William Carlos Williams in 1950 and learned directly from him, as I learned directly from him ... as Robert Duncan and Charles Olson for many years corresponded with Pound and Williams, as Robert Creeley wrote back and forth to Pound for instructions on running [*The Black Mountain Review*].... We were carrying on a tradition, rather than being rebels.... The academic people were ignoring Williams and ignoring Pound and Louis Zukofsky and Mina Loy and Basil Bunting and most of the major rough writers of the Whitmanic, open form tradition in America.

¹¹ My title is taken from Williams' 1948 essay.

But we had that historical continuity, from
person to person. There is no gap.

(92-93)¹²

The twentieth-century poets Ginsberg mentions here comprise part of a vast network of writers defiant, at once, of received (i.e., European) modes of expression—what Olson calls in his manifesto, "NON-Projective" or "closed" verse forms (*Selected Writings* 15)—and of the New Criticism which valued those modes. This group of authors fashioned a new model for American poetry founded in part on Whitman's theory of open verse, for, to them, Whitman was the first distinctly American voice in poetry, and the first to attempt to devise a poetic form commensurate with his own time and place.

Whitman framed his artistic theory in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, a document influenced in part by Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Poet" (1844). Emerson's essay marks the first and most celebrated attempt by an American writer of stature to express how dependent his country's authors were upon European conventions. Emerson envisions poets as unique and special citizens, driven to create by the living force they sense in their surroundings (*Collected Works* 3:

¹² Ginsberg implicates Kerouac and Creeley more directly in this line in his essay "Back to the Wall" (1964): "Uniquely the art work is of one single hand, the mark of individual person.... Thus in poetry the individualized metre reflective of eccentric breathing W.C. Williams thru myself Corso Kerouac Creeley Wieners Snyder etc." (678).

10). Sadly, though, as he was brought to observe, no such writer has yet served America: "I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not, with sufficient plainness, or sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life, nor dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstance.... We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials..." (21). Central to this claim, that American poets do not appropriately celebrate their own "times and social circumstance," is Emerson's conviction that the nation desperately needed its own set of aesthetic standards. Originating from a fledgling country and thus facing what could only be termed a vacuum of indigenous literary culture, American authors of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries naturally turned to the familiar for artistic guidance, appropriating the ready-made forms of Europe for their own use. In Emerson's view, American writers required a native genius to free them from their cultural enthrallment, a genius who could fashion a new model of poetry from the beauty and energy of America itself: "O poet! a new nobility is conferred in groves and pastures, and not in castles, or by the sword-blade, any longer" (23).¹³

¹³ Emerson introduces an important theme in "The Poet," a theme central to the poetics of Williams, Pound, and Olson: "it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem.... The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form" (6-7). Form and style do not generate poems in Emerson's view, but the poet's intellectual and emotional

After reading *Leaves of Grass*, Emerson was convinced that America had produced its first native genius in Walt Whitman; and so he wrote a letter to the poet (21 July 1855) praising the virtues of his great work: "I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of 'Leaves of Grass.' I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed.... It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile & stingy nature, as if too much handiwork or too much lymph in the temperament, were making our western wits fat & mean" (*Leaves of Grass* 731-32). Emerson esteems *Leaves of Grass* over any poem that the country had yet produced; the expansiveness of its vision, as well as its celebration of the inexhaustible and "incomparable" resources available to the American writer, rendered the poem, for him, a work of rare genius.

Whitman outlines his view of the ideal American poet, poetic form, and subject matter in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*. Like Emerson, Whitman envisions the ideal American poet as an embodiment of the genius of place: "a bard is to be commensurate with a people [....] His spirit responds to his country's spirit....he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes [....] When the long Atlantic coast stretches longer and the Pacific coast

responses to experience (what Emerson calls "a metre-making argument"). As such, experience itself should be the primary determinant of form for the American writer.

stretches longer he easily stretches with them north or south. He spans between them also from east to west and reflects what is between them" (713).¹⁴ The ideal American poet so conceived is very much *in* the world, innately connected to his/her surroundings. And, Whitman believes, it is the poet's duty to translate this intimate relationship, not merely in subject matter but, just as importantly, in form.¹⁵

One of the progenitors of open form poetics in American

¹⁴ Many have observed that Whitman's patriotism was somewhat excessive and melodramatic. But Pound's parody is perhaps the most poignant appraisal of that patriotism:

Whitman is the voice of one who saith:

Lo, behold, I eat water-melons. When I eat
water-melons the world eats water-melons
through me.
When the world eats water-melons, I partake of
the world's water-melons.
The bugs,
The worms,
The negroes, etc.,
Eat water-melons; All nature eats water-melons.
Those eidolons and particles of the Cosmos
Which do not now partake of water-melons
Will at some future time partake of water-
melons.
Praised be Allah or Ramanathanath Khrishna!

(*The Spirit of Romance* 168-69)

¹⁵ As one may gauge from his letter to Emerson (August, 1856), Whitman seemed confident in his abilities to fulfill this task: "Every day I go among the people of Manhattan Island, Brooklyn, and other cities, and among the young men, to discover the spirit of them, and to refresh myself. These are to be attended to.... In poems, the young men of The States shall be represented, for they out-rival the best of the rest of the earth" (733-34).

literature, Whitman struggled to find a means of singing his nation: "The poetic quality is not marshalled in rhyme or uniformity or abstract addresses to things nor in melancholy complaints or good precepts, but is the life of these and much else and is in the soul.... The fluency and ornaments of the finest poems or music or orations or recitations are not independent but dependent. All beauty comes from beautiful blood and a beautiful brain" (716). Whitman, in company with Emerson, believed that technical skill alone would not distinguish a native poet as a genius, for beauty in verse originates not in such aesthetic ornamentations as rhyme and metre, but in the poet's mind and spirit. The conventions of verse are simply tools that might aid writers in verbalizing their innate sense of the beauty of their surroundings. Often, as Whitman insists in his letter to Emerson, those tools are unsuitable for the task at hand:

The genius of all foreign literature is clipped
and cut small, compared to our genius, and is
essentially insulting to our usages, and to the
organic compacts of These States. Old forms,
old poems, majestic and proper in their own
lands here in this land are exiles; the air
here is very strong. Much that stands well and
has a little enough place provided for it in
the small scales of European kingdoms, empires,
and the like, here stands haggard, dwarfed,

ludicrous, or has no place little enough
 provided for it. Authorities, poems, models,
 laws, names, imported into America, are useful
 to America today to destroy them, and so move
 disencumbered to great works, great days.

(736)¹⁶

Whitman insists that conventional poetic forms, developed over centuries with a view to representing "the small scales of European kingdoms, empires, and the like" to the culturally refined, cannot adequately express the unique experience of frontier America. Native poets must therefore remake form in the very image of their country, because "the greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things," a medium whose goal it is to express "the movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside" (*Leaves of Grass* 719).

¹⁶ Henry David Thoreau expresses similar sentiments in his essay "Walking": "English literature, from the days of minstrels to the Lake Poets—Chaucer and Spenser and Milton, and even Shakespeare, included—breathes no quite fresh and, in this sense, wild strain. It is an essentially tame and civilized literature, reflecting Greece and Rome" (615-16). In his "Letter to An Australian Editor" (1946) and "An Approach to the Poem" (1948), Williams echoes Whitman's provocative statement that traditional forms must be destroyed if American poetry is to develop and thrive. This grisly analogy, from a 1952 interview, demonstrates Williams' aversion to traditional forms: "Forcing twentieth-century America into a sonnet—gosh how I hate sonnets—is like putting a crab into a square box. You've got to cut his legs off to make him fit. When you get through, you don't have a crab any more" (Williams, *Interviews* 30).

Caught up in the patriotic spirit of their time, Emerson and Whitman were very much concerned with developing and promoting a national literature. For them, a new nation demanded a new and unique culture, and they believed that it was in part the poet's duty to provide America with that culture. In the twentieth century, however, there were other factors governing the American poet's sense of vocation in society. Generally, the writer was motivated to experiment not so much by a nationalist spirit (Williams and Zukofsky are exceptional in this regard) as by the rapid and often disturbing changes taking place in the early decades of the century. Scientific discoveries and technological advancements led to a reevaluation of fundamental beliefs. Darwinism challenged Christian doctrine, and the immense loss of life in World War I led many to question the very notion of a rational Providence. The poets of the age were sensitive to such changes and, while most harboured a deep respect for the literature of the past, they also implicitly believed that such tidy forms as the sonnet and heroic couplet could not adequately express what Williams would call the "turmoil" of the day ("Letter to an Australian Editor" 10). Thus, rather than rely on the predictable patterns of inherited formulations, Modernists created ostensibly structureless verse in response to the seeming randomness of life in their time. This call to arms, as it were, corresponds to the way that many poets in the early

decades of the century envisioned their roles as artists:

I propose sweeping changes from top to bottom
of the poetic structure.... I say we are *through*
with the iambic pentameter as presently
conceived ... through with the measured quatrain,
the staid concatenations of sounds in the usual
stanza, the sonnet.... What, by this approach I
am trying to sketch, what we are trying to do
is ... to seek (what we believe is there) a new
measure or a new way of measuring that will be
commensurate with the social, economic world in
which we are living as contrasted with the past.

(Williams, *Selected Essays* 281, 283).¹⁷

Of all the Modernists renown for their experimentation
in verse, Pound and Williams had the greatest impact on
American poets in the aftermath of World War II.¹⁸

¹⁷ See also Williams' essay "An Approach to the Poem" (58).

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that contemporary American writers generally revere Pound as a radical innovator of poetic form, while dismissing Eliot as a traditionalist. Many who have distinguished between the two (including Olson, Creeley, Duncan, Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Jerome Rothenberg) believe that Eliot's poetry and criticism arrested the development of the American avant-garde, both before and after World War II. Not surprisingly, many reacted strongly to Eliot's counsel in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that writers proceed with a strong awareness of tradition, and incorporate what he took to be the best of the past into their own work (see especially *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence* 1.22).

Contemporary writers also feel that Eliot's reverence for tradition is evident in his poetry. Ginsberg once denounced Eliot, believing that he wrote in a "quasi-iambic"

Meticulous craftsmen, they used their skills as writers not to impose form on experience but, like Whitman, to create forms from experience. Pound and Williams at once revered and reviled Whitman as a poet. For instance, Pound saw in Whitman a sensitivity to nineteenth-century America that led him to reassess the value of inherited forms in his own age: "You can learn more of nineteenth-century America from Whitman than from any of the writers who either refrained from perceiving, or limited their record to what they had been taught to consider suitable literary expression" (*ABC of Reading* 192). Similarly, Williams shared with Whitman the ideal of a poetry commensurate with its immediate culture and time: Whitman "destroyed the forms antiquity decreed him to take and use" (Williams, "America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry" 2); and he himself attempted to create "a new order ... a relative order ... which was essential to the new world" ("Essay on *Leaves of Grass*" 27).

While saluting Whitman's demand for new form in American verse, Pound and Williams also believed that the

rhythm (cited from Eberhart 25). In the lecture "Advice to Youth," Ginsberg and Duncan criticize Eliot for imitating or adopting past forms in his verse, and then praise the "ever-present form" of *The Cantos* (Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim* 108). See also Kerouac's "The Origins of Joy in Poetry" (*Good Blonde* 74). Obviously, Eliot could be seen as a writer who favoured open-form poetics, and what he took from Pound's example could be viewed as similar to what writers like Ginsberg and Duncan took from works like *The Cantos*. However, I am restricting my study here to those poets most favoured by the postwar writers of my study.

nineteenth-century poet was handicapped by a lack of technical proficiency that ultimately prevented him from realizing his goals. Pound insisted that Whitman's measure was sloppy and careless: "If you insist, however, on dissecting his language you will probably find that it is wrong NOT because he broke all of what were considered in his day 'the rules' but because he is spasmodically conforming to this, that or the other; sporadically dragging in a bit of 'regular' meter, using a bit of literary language, and putting his adjectives where, in the spoken language, they are not" (*ABC of Reading* 192).¹⁹ In a similar view, Williams argues that the (chaotic) structure of *Leaves of Grass* indicates that Whitman was an unskilled craftsman and, thus, that he ultimately failed to create a measure commensurate with nineteenth-century America: "Whitman was right in breaking our bounds but, having no valid restraints to hold him, went wild. He didn't know any better. At the last he resorted to a loose sort of language with no discipline about it of any sort..." (*Selected Essays* 339).²⁰

¹⁹ Pound's ambivalence toward Whitman is also evident in his essays "Patria Mia" and "What I feel about Walt Whitman" (*Selected Prose* 99-141, 145-46).

²⁰ In his "Essay on *Leaves of Grass*," Williams likens Whitman's verse to a tornado striking (27). And in his letter to Denise Levertov of 13 June 1956, he describes Whitman's verse as formless (*Stony Brook* 166). It was largely Whitman's work that led Eliot, Pound, and Williams to reject free verse as a measure. In his "Reflections on

Castigating Whitman for what they saw as an utter absence of artistic craft, both Pound and Williams nevertheless conceived their methods with the nineteenth-century poet's convictions in mind. Certainly, both denounced past forms of verse as unsuitable for contemporary poetry. Pound counselled the new poet to avoid "florid adjectives or elaborate hyperbole," insisting that "no one cares to hear, in strained iambics, that he feels sprightly in spring" (*Selected Prose* 41, 35). He deplored the ornate and affected rhetoric of Victorian verse, believing that it promoted an "'artificial' universe of discourse divorced from common speech" (Harper 84).

These disparaging statements notwithstanding, Pound did not deny that skill and craft were indispensable to a poet of distinction (to which his arraignments of Whitman's verse testify). But rather than mould literal experience to fit predetermined forms or conventions of poetic speech, the

Vers Libre" (1917) and "The Music of Poetry" (1942), Eliot adamantly insists that free verse "does not exist, for there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos" (91). Pound applauded Eliot's claim that "no verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job" (65). While not dismissing *vers libre* as a measure, Pound strongly counsels the writer against its use, unless s/he requires such a measure to express a particular emotion. Like Eliot, Williams denies the possibility that verse can be free, claiming that *vers libre* is simply "verse whose proper structure escapes a man's efforts to control it" ("America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry" 1). See also Williams' 1932 letter to Kay Boyle (*Selected Letters* 135-36), and his essays "A New Line is a New Measure" and "The Poem as a Field of Action" (*Selected Essays* 283).

poet could more effectively employ that skill and craft, so Pound believed, by devising forms that embodied personal experience. For Pound, precision of diction and "absolute rhythm" distinguished good poetry from what Eliot called the "bad prose" of free verse (Pound, *Literary Essays* 9; Eliot 65). In his Imagist manifesto, "A Retrospect" (1918), Pound outlined a method of creating a measure drawn not "from books, convention, and *cliché*," but from "life" (*Literary Essays* 11).

According to Pound, the most important vehicle of expression in Imagism is, of course, the Image, defined as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (4). The term "complex," as he acknowledges, is drawn from the theory of Freudian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, who had defined it as "a system of connected ideas, with a strong emotional tone, and a tendency to produce actions of a certain definite character." In Freud's theory, the complex, the system of ideas formed in the 'patient,' has a direct bearing on, even controls, patterns of behaviour:

Consider, for example, the immensely powerful complex formed in the young man who has recently fallen in love.... All his mental energy is absorbed in weaving trains of thought centred in the beloved one.... Every event which happens is brought into relation with his passion, and the whole universe is

for him nothing but a setting for his dominating complex.

(Hart 61, 62)

Pound's theory postulates that a type of complex forms in the mind during the creative act: "Intense emotion causes pattern to arise in the mind" (Pound, *Selected Prose* 374). A registering of such a complex, the Image thus provides the poet with a means of concretely representing a mind's response to its experience.²¹

The precise rendering of such a mental pattern necessitated for Pound the creation of new forms. Accordingly, as he insists, the true poet cannot draw on inherited formulations to present his Image:

Don't chop your stuff into separate *iamb*s.

Don't make each line stop dead at the end,
and then begin every next line with a heave.
Let the beginning of the next line catch the
rise of the rhythm wave, unless you want a
definite longish pause.

In short, behave as a musician, a good
musician, when dealing with that phase of your

²¹ One must be wary of applying Hart's theory too rigorously to a reading of Pound's Imagism, for Imagism is not psychoanalytic discourse. As Pound himself acknowledged, he used the term as a simple analogy to explain his craft: "I use the term 'complex' rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as Hart, though we might not agree absolutely in our application" (*Literary Essays* 4).

art which has exact parallels in music. The same laws govern, and you are bound by no others.

Naturally, your rhythmic structure should not destroy the shape of your words, or their natural sound, or their meaning.

(*Literary Essays* 6)

Pound finds iambic pentameter too "symmetrical" a metre accurately to render the pattern of his thought. Each experience (or complex) is unique, and therefore requires a form, a rhythm "which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed" (9). A Pound so convinced was brought to embrace a method of composition that privileged "emotion" as "an organiser of form" (*Selected Prose* 375), that allowed him to render in words the activity of the mind in forms that approximated that mind's movement.²²

²² Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," for example, showcases the poet's intellectual and emotional responses to an experience on a subway platform:

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

(*Selected Poems* 35)

The poem's 'intention' here is to record "the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective" (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 89). In its archaic sense, the substantive "apparition" denotes "epiphany." Standing on the subway platform, looking down over a sea of faces, the poet receives a sudden flash of illumination that is recorded in the final line of the poem. The platform scene "inspired in him a certain complex emotion" that triggered a visual

Many postwar poets, among them Creeley, Ginsberg, and Duncan, valued Pound's search for forms suitable for representing the creative mind in its response to the world. Of all the authors that influenced new poets in the fifties, however, William Carlos Williams had the most profound and lasting effect, in part because he was a more accessible role-model. Williams offered valuable advice in his correspondence with Creeley, Ginsberg, Duncan, Levertov, Cid Corman, and Harold Norse. And in 1950, Williams held a writer's workshop at Reed College (in Oregon), on which occasion he offered Whalen, Snyder, and Lew Welch insightful feedback on their writing. In his "Essentials," Kerouac cites Williams as a source of his tenet "Method." Paul Blackburn, Amiri Baraka, Frank O'Hara, Joel Oppenheimer, Jerome Rothenberg, and James Wright—these represent but a few of the other poets of the postwar avant-garde in America who have acknowledged Williams as a major influence.

That such an impressive number of American poets have been so profoundly influenced by Williams' work is perhaps not surprising, since virtually from the beginning of his literary career Williams was more consistently outspoken than Pound against traditional forms. In his statement to

parallel in his mind: "the two lines together present the reader with the 'intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time' that was Pound's experience" (Harper 91). The second line is virtually superimposed on the first, re-presenting the energy of the creative moment in an epiphanic flash.

Cid Corman, Williams laments the fact that readers and writers of the twentieth century still revere the staid forms of the past:

They cannot see that poems cannot any longer
be made following a Euclidean measure,
"beautiful" as this may make them. The very
grounds for our beliefs have altered. We do
not live that way any more; nothing in our
lives, at bottom, is ordered according to that
measure; our social concepts, our schools, our
very religious ideas, certainly our
understanding of mathematics are greatly
altered.... Return as they may to the classics
for their models it will not solve anything for
them.

(*Selected Essays* 337-38)²³

²³ Williams often took the opportunity in his criticism and correspondence to dismiss conventional poetic forms. In "A New Line is a New Measure" (1947), the poet claims that he is "tired of the trivial measures of clever verse, the intellectual non-music, and the imitative that is *only* the imitative; as if we, we could revive the songs of the Elizabethans. Their music is our staleness. We know it was once fresh but never for us can it ever be that, never be the freshness of that day" (11). Williams' vehement opposition to the "Euclidean" forms of the past was exacerbated at times by traditionalists who persisted in returning to the classics for their artistic models, as can be seen in this Whitmanic pact that the poet once made with himself to eliminate all vestiges of tradition from contemporary verse: "I shall never be satisfied," he vowed, "until I have destroyed the whole of poetry as it has been in the past" (cited from Lloyd 253).

Believing, like Emerson and Whitman, that it is the responsibility of the American poet to represent the nation and the age, Williams feels that the "Euclidean" measures of tradition are inappropriate for the task at hand. He insists that a uniquely American measure is needed, a measure derived from local speech rhythms that would enable the poet "to represent what his mind perceives directly about him" ("Measure" 148).²⁴

Williams' essay "The American Idiom" defines that measure: "in reply to the fixed foot of the ancient line, including the Elizabethans, we must have a reply: it is the variable foot which we are beginning to discover after Whitman's advent" (251). The variable foot was not metrically uniform or "recondite . . . removed from the people" (cited from Thirlwall 253), but vital and engaged, inherently and proximately democratic—a measure that "varie[d] with the demands of language" (Williams, "American

²⁴ Cautioning the contemporary American writer to avoid "the speech of English country people," Williams promotes instead the use of "language modified by our environment; the American environment" (cited from Koehler 10). It would be difficult to compile a complete list of essays in which Williams petitioned for the creation of an American measure. Yet, even from a sampling of his prose, one can conclude that this goal was of primary importance to him. See, especially, "America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry" (1917), "To Write American Poetry" (1935), "How to Write" (1936), "Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist" (1939), "Letter to an Australian Editor," "A New Line is a New Measure," "An Approach to the Poem" (1948), "The Poem as a Field of Action" (1948), and "The American Language—Again" (1955).

Language—Again" 6).

Williams' effort to revitalize poetic measure is evident even in his earliest work, and especially in *Spring and All* (1923). The text is an exploration of the relevance of conventional forms in twentieth-century verse, and an experiment in poetic measure. Williams interweaves poetry and prose, creating a "field of action," in which field the conventional boundaries between the two genres are naturally challenged.²⁵ The prose, with its fragmented syntax and 'choppy' paragraph structure, has the informal quality of a notebook. Lacking formal rhetoric and polished style, the work reads like a personal journal, even as it records an intellectual struggle with the general problem of redefining poetic form in contemporary art. Many of the prose excerpts reflect on the role of the imagination in poetry, and arraign (and not without warmth) the "crude symbolism," the "strained associations," and the "complicated ritualistic forms" of tradition that, in the poet's view, are "designed to separate the work from 'reality'" (*Imaginations* 102).²⁶

²⁵ See especially his discourse on the two genres (*Imaginations* 143-46), in which he contends that metre is not necessarily unique to poetry. Believing that it is also possible for prose to possess a distinct metre, Williams argues that, at times, the only distinguishing feature between the two genres is surface appearance.

²⁶ One of Williams most telling attacks on tradition naturally takes the form of a satire. In "Chapter I" of *Spring and All*, the poet portrays the bearers of tradition as a fundamentalist group. "The Traditionalists of Plagiarism," as they are called, are fanatical advocates of

The poems of *Spring and All* evince Williams' desire to draw a measure from life, a measure "related to the movements of the imagination revealed in words" (133). In one of the volume's finest pieces, "By the road to the contagious hospital," the poet effectively writes "from within the act of perception" (Clark 126). And, ultimately, it is a writing that "*embodies process*" (Doyle 28):

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the

northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the
waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines—

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches—

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind—

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

One by one objects are defined—
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

convention who browbeat any audience that they draw with their belief that tradition is "the solidarity of life," and who therefore pressure the populace "to return to the proven truths of tradition, even to the twice proven" (98).

But now the stark dignity of
entrance—Still, the profound change

has come upon them: rooted they
grip down and begin to awaken

(*Imaginations* 95-96)

The rhythmic movement of the poem coincides with the movement of the poet's eye as it pans over a specific scene. The first two lines of the poem, in the form of prepositional phrases, help establish this motion. Each preposition signals a slight shift in perspective, the poet's attempt to get a 'fix' on his location. The enjambment of lines two and three introduces an element of intellectual response into the presentation, the sense that the poet is attempting to evaluate the details of the external scene in the very act of perceiving them. The line-break arrests the conceptual flow, suggesting a momentary pause in thought, as the observer struggles to establish the specific quality or texture of the clouds.

The enjambment of the first verse and the second performs a similar function. The rhythmic interruption in these verses signals a pause in thought, as the perceiver determines the direction of the wind. And the fact that the first two lines of stanza four pivot, as it were, on a balancing of two hues suggests the poet's brief struggle to identify the colour of the bushes by the side of the road. The perceiver lingers over those plants momentarily, which pause is conveyed in the grouping of adjectives in line ten.

Having thus oriented himself to his environment, the poet then assesses the scene in a general way in stanza five. This sudden acknowledgement of the arrival of spring prompts another shift in perspective, in the form of a zoom-focus on the frail buds stirring to life around him.

"One by one," Williams avers at the end of the poem, "objects are defined" in the mind of the observer, who conveys the "clarity" of his vision in the movement of the line—in the form of the piece itself. "Relative measure" enabled Williams to create art in forms consonant with his time, in poems shaped by the activity of his imagination. That he endorsed Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse" is not surprising, then. Indeed, Williams included most of the contents of that essay in his autobiography, praising Olson's recognition of the poem as "a field rather than an assembly of more or less ankylosed lines" (329). "Projective Verse" is a kind of synthesis of the compositional theories of Pound and Williams, a celebration of their achievements in the development of open forms. In distinguishing their verse from "The NON-Projective ... or what a French critic calls 'closed' verse," Olson strategically aligns his own method with those of Pound and Williams (*Selected Writings* 15). Influenced by the organic forms of *Paterson* and *The Cantos*, he conceives of the poem in open verse as a "COMPOSITION BY FIELD." It is not the "inherited line, stanza, over-all form" that give shape to

the author's statement in "field composition," but the energy of experience itself, the patterns of thought and the rhythms of perception forged into unity by the creative imagination (16).

Olson insists that, for the projectivist, "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT."²⁷ In "FIELD COMPOSITION," so Olson argues, poetic form does not preexist content, but evolves during the creative act from the needs of the individual poem, and corresponds precisely to the poet's physiological and intellectual energy during composition:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE

(*Selected Writings* 19)²⁸

Olson's formula gestures to what he calls elsewhere in his manifesto the 'transferral' of creative energy, the energy of the body and of thought, from the poet to the poem (*Selected Writings* 16). This is not to imply that the technique of the projectivist is random: an innate sense of the music of language helps the poet select the words most appropriate to the moment. The "obedience of the ear to the

²⁷ Olson attributes the authorship of this statement to Creeley. I examine the circumstances surrounding its formulation in Chapter Three.

²⁸ Olson's formula is perhaps influenced by Williams' definition of the creative act as "the deeper ... portions of the personality speaking, the middle brain, the nerves, the glands, the very muscles and bones of the body itself speaking" ("How to Write" 146).

syllables" as "particles of sound" is as crucial to the success of this enterprise as the poet's intellectual "sense of the words which they compose" (18, 17).

The second half of the formula focuses on the creation of rhythm or measure. In conventional forms, the movement of the line is typically controlled by a metrical scheme to which poetic inspiration must adjust itself. For the projectivist, however, measure is determined (quite literally) by the musculature of the body; the line is scored in accordance with the physiological responses to the moment—specifically, to the rhythms of the poet's breath: "the line comes," Olson swears it, "from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes" (19). Together, the two equations of the formula define the technique of the projective poet, for whom "form is literally within the event" (Altieri, "Olson's Poetics" 176).

Olson's theory postulates that poetic consciousness is an active presence in the world created, a presence reflected not merely in the sound and rhythm of the line but, on a larger scale, in the conceptual movement of the piece itself. In Olson's terminology, the structure of an open-verse poem is "kinetic," determined by the poet's engagement with "the objects of reality": "The objects which occur at every given moment of composition ... are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by

work together to represent just such a motion.

Olson's theory of field composition challenged the restrictions of conventional closed verse, and provided many postwar poets (Duncan, Creeley, and other Black Mountain writers in particular) with a model for personalizing poetic form. In section four of "I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You," Olson reinforces his basic argument that, if contemporary verse "is to go ahead, if it is to be of essential use," the poet must shun "the 'old' base of the non-projective" and create form that is the "equivalent of the energy which propelled him in the first place" (*Selected Writings* 15, 16):

one loves only form
and form only comes
into existence when
the thing is born

born of yourself, born
of hay and cotton struts,
of street-pickings, wharves, weeds
you carry in, my bird

of a bone of a fish
of a straw, or will
of a color, of a bell
of yourself, torn

(*Maximus Poems* 7)

Olson restates what has been a central concern of American poets since Whitman: native writers must develop form from life, for it is the debris littering the streets that they traverse, the articles and implements commonly found in a fishing village, or the neon lights, graffiti, and

streetcars marking the contemporary urban landscape that constitute "the sum" of experience (5).

Although "Projective Verse" significantly contributed to the development of contemporary poetry, Olson was not the first to conceive of the poem as a kind of energy "field." The ideogrammic method of *The Cantos* enabled Pound to orchestrate the poetic utterance with a view to representing the creative process in art. Through paratactical "juxtaposition of linguistic (or pictorial, spatial, tonal) particulars" (Géfin xvi), Pound fused patterns of observation and reflection, of reminiscence and perception, in an organic form that Ginsberg appropriately called "a working model of consciousness" (Ginsberg, "Pound's Influence" 7).

Williams offers another type of "field" composition in his *Spring and All* and *The Descent of Winter* (1928). In these two early works, the poet realized his ideal of generating a form flexible enough to contain the varying intensities of his emotion and the shifts (no matter how sudden or radical) in his thought and perception as he engaged American life. In *Paterson*, a work that many postwar poets saw as the paradigmatic poem as a field of action, Williams explored this technique with a depth and extensiveness unmatched by any other single work in his oeuvre.

CHAPTER 2

*PATERSON: WILLIAMS' "PSYCHOLOGIC-SOCIAL PANORAMA"*²⁹

Williams influenced all the Black Mountain people, he influenced Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen and Lew Welch out in San Francisco and he influenced Robert Duncan and Mike McClure in San Francisco, he influenced Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch and John Ashbery here. The influence was that originality of taking the materials from your own existence rather than taking on hand-me-down poetic materials, speech units, rhythmic units and trying to adapt your life to them—you articulate *your* rhythm, your own rhythms.³⁰

Williams began drafting *Paterson* after struggling for almost three decades to create a uniquely American poetic measure. Exhibiting his characteristically staunch resistance to received poetic forms during the initial stages of the poem's composition, Williams insisted that the conventional epic formula was an unsuitable model for what would become his great work: "I knew that I wanted to say

²⁹ The phrase is taken from Williams' letter to Robert McAlmon, 8 August 1943 (*Selected Letters* 216).

³⁰ Allen Ginsberg, in his interview with Alison Colbert (297).

[*Paterson*] in *my* form. I was aware that it wasn't a finished form, yet I knew it was not formless. I had to invent my form, if form it was.... I respected the rules but I decided I must define the traditional in terms of my own world" (*I Wanted to Write a Poem* 74). His correspondence of the early forties indicates, however, that the necessity of building an entirely new epic form made the composition of the poem a Herculean task.³¹

Paterson testifies both to those difficulties and to the eventual successes that Williams enjoyed as the poem began taking shape. The work is a record of the quintessential quest of the twentieth-century American poet for living form, and the culmination of Williams' experiments with a mode of mixed genres. Rather than relying on a chronological structuring of events such as in the conventional epic, Williams fused excerpts of historical prose, letters, impressions, personal reflections, and observations into a dynamic field of action, a form that reflected, as he avers, "the character of [the] age" (*Selected Letters* 130): "I conceived the whole of *Paterson* at one stroke and wrote it down—as it appears at the beginning of the poem. All I had to do after that was to

³¹ See William Carlos Williams and James Laughlin: *Selected Letters* (Witemeyer) and *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*. For other helpful accounts of the poem's evolution, see James Laughlin's "William Carlos Williams and the Making of *Paterson*: A Memoir."

fill in the details as I went along, from day to day. My life in the district supplied the rest. I did not theorize directly when I was writing but went wherever the design forced me to go" (333).

The form of the first three books of *Paterson* issues from the poet's experiences in specific locales of Paterson, New Jersey. In Book One, for example, the protagonist is situated on the banks of the Passaic River, contemplating its movement and its significance to the city; and the book's form reflects this process of contemplation, the poet's quiet awareness of his surroundings. Book Two takes its shape from a walk that the protagonist takes through Garrett Park, and from his reflections on the activity playing out around him during that walk. At the beginning of Book Three, the poet enters a public library, seeking a useful model in books, in the local histories, for an artistic ordering of his world. Almost immediately, however, the library's atmosphere becomes oppressive, and his mind begins to wander, as in a reverie. The final two books present a "complex" in the poet, his preoccupation with artists whose shunning of conventional forms and techniques enabled them to make something significantly new. Thus, Books Four and Five signal not the end of Williams' search for form, but new beginnings in an ongoing quest. As a collage of continuous experience, the poem lacks formal closure: "the completed form" of *Paterson* "is nothing more

than the pursuit itself" (Kartiganer 310).¹²

THOUGHTS INTERLACING: THE MIND AS RIVER

In the preface to *Paterson*, Williams restates his goal, to "write particularly" from a direct experience with his milieu (*The Autobiography* 391):

To make a start,
out of particulars
and make them general, rolling
up the sum, by defective means—
Sniffing the trees,
just another dog
among a lot of dogs.

(*Paterson* 3)

This passage might serve as an epigraph to Paterson's epic quest. The dog, randomly investigating its surroundings, familiarizing itself with an immediate environment, images Williams' ideal American poet. Like the dog, the poet defines a subject and discovers a form by investigating the minute particulars of his territory. This theme is reinforced by the image of the poet in the process of

¹² I am somewhat uncomfortable with Walter Scott Peterson's argument that Book Five subverts the unity that the poet achieved in the first four. The danger of such a view is that it privileges the closure that Williams originally projected for the poem, but eventually rejected as artificial, contrived for the sole purpose of presenting a tidily finished artifact. Perhaps because Williams viewed *Paterson* as the record of his creative activity, he later decided that a more appropriate ending for the poem would be a gesture of disclosure (see my reading of Book Four below). If one approaches the poem in the spirit that Williams ultimately intended, one may argue that he could conceivably have added any number of additional books to the original four without detracting from the poem's unity.

reading the movement of the Passaic River:

Jostled as are the waters approaching
the brink, his thoughts
interlace, repel and cut under,
rise rock-thwarted and turn aside
but forever strain forward—or strike
an eddy and whirl, marked by a
leaf or curdy spume, seeming
to forget .

(*Paterson* 7)

The Passaic flows through Paterson, gathering the effluvia of the area in its waters; and the path that it takes (in essence its form) is channelled by the local topography. During the process of creation, the mind of the poet becomes river-like, gathering in its progress the minute particulars of the area.

Paterson opens with the "Delineament of the Giants," a quasi-romantic portrait of the city and its environs.¹¹ As Williams claims, "Part One introduces the elemental character of the place" (*Paterson*, "Author's Note" np):

—Say it, no ideas but in things—
nothing but the black faces of the houses
and cylindrical trees
bent, forked by preconception and accident—
split, furrowed, creased, mottled, stained—
secret—into the body of the light!

From above, higher than the spires, higher
even than the office towers, from oozy fields
abandoned to grey beds of dead grass,
black sumac, withered weed-stalks,
mud and thickets cluttered with dead leaves—

¹¹ The title of Book One is worthy of note. The poet's technique of delineating the surrounding detail perhaps influenced Kerouac's sketching method, which I discuss in detail in Chapter Five.

the river comes pouring in above the city
 and crashes from the edge of the gorge
 in a recoil of spray and rainbow mists—

(6-7)

Like "By the road to the contagious hospital," this passage captures a process of observation. The prepositional phrase that opens the second verse defines a shift in perspective, from the area immediately surrounding the poet to a point somewhere above him, which perspectival effect is enhanced by the stanzaic division and the indentation of the first verse. Thus, a subtle siting by typography approximates the spatial relationship between the viewer and his milieu. In the first two lines of the second stanza, the poet's eye pans upward and refocuses on what appears to be a wetland area surrounding the river. The layering of images in the next three lines simulates the accumulation of external detail in the viewer's mind during the 'seeing.' The dash at the end of line five signs a sudden arrestation in the motion of the eye and another change in perspective, as the poet focuses once more on the river. Each of the final three lines signals a slight variation in the observer's perspective on the motion of the water.

The form of the passage is determined by the poet's investigation of the surrounding area. Yet, the sketches of the river and its environs contain more than just the data literally seen. The Passaic evokes documented memories of local history, which appear as prose excerpts juxtaposed to

the poet's perceptions. For instance, an observation of the river's falls introduces a reflection on the tragic deaths of Sarah Cumming and the New Jersey jumper, Sam Patch (14-15, 15-17). With this juxtapositional technique, Williams conveys his efforts almost Whitmanesquely: by tapping into the history of the Passaic, the poet hopes to intensify his bond with the area.

However, this passage also introduces what becomes the central dilemma of Book Three. As we know, Williams often rejected traditional styles of verse as unconfigured to the American experience. In *Paterson*, he seems at times equally dismissive of America's past. The poet occasionally immerses himself in local history, in a struggle to find the means of reading his environment authentically. Yet, as we see in Book Three, especially, even a text belonging to a *local* past can sometimes produce (ironically enough) a creative block that alienates the poet from his surroundings. At the end of Section I, he acknowledges that the "false language" of history has displaced him, rendering the "water pouring still / from the edge of the rocks, filling / his ears with its sound, hard to interpret" (15, 17). In the first three books of *Paterson*, divorce is a recurring metaphor for the alienation of the poet from his milieu. Yet, this separation is never permanent. At the end of Section II, for example, the poet as traveller is forced "into back streets, to begin again" (28), and he

refocuses his creative energy on the "things" of his surroundings. And it is his intense probing, in Section III, into figures of "Plaster saints, glass jewels / and those apt paper flowers," "the sink with the waste farina in it and / lumps of rancid meat, milk-bottle-tops" (38, 39) that helps prepare him for his entry into Garrett Park in Book Two.

THE PARK: A POETICS OF INCURSION

The poet enters the park on a Sunday afternoon, apparently because it is a popular place for the citizens of Paterson to congregate on a holiday. At the beginning of Section I, the protagonist expresses a Whitmanesque joy at the prospect of being surrounded by fellow Americans. He is elated to be "among the others," treading "there the same stones / on which their feet slip as they climb, / paced by their dogs" (43). The occasion instills in the poet an acute sense of the life around him that stirs his imagination and compels him to reestablish his bond with the land:

Outside
 outside myself
 there is a world,
 he rumbled, subject to my incursions
 —a world
 (to me) at rest,
 which I approach
 concretely—

(43)

The poet reflects on what he sees as he moves through the

park. By focusing on the world outside the self, the world of the park, he achieves concreteness of approach and a sense of connectedness to his America. In Book Two, Williams practises what Paul Mariani calls "guerilla" poetics (94). By repeating the participle "Walking" at various intervals throughout the book, he creates a framework of continuous, physical movement, within which a mental process plays out: "Walking" is "a refrain word carrying him from one passing moment to the next" (Duffey 79).

On page 44, the "refrain" sets the body of the poet in motion through the park. The indentation of the next three stanzas helps to convey a simultaneously occurring activity—his observation of the surrounding details:

Walking —

Thickets gather about groups of squat sand-
pine,
all but from bare rock . . .

—a scattering of man-high cedars (sharp
cones),
antlered sumac .

—roots, for the most part, writhing
upon the surface
(so close are we to ruin every
day!)
searching the punk-dry rot

Walking —

(Paterson 44-45)

The general overview of the scene recorded in the second line here presents the initial response of the poet: the

natural impulse in a hiker, when beginning an excursion, to get a 'fix' on position. As he examines the area more closely, a more accurate picture forms, and he qualifies his initial observation. This slight modification signs itself in line three, with the subordinate clause "all but from bare rock." These two lines form a complex sentence that renders a completed thought or observation, suggesting that the viewing process proceeds, initially, at a leisurely pace. The next two details, recorded in point-form notations, indicate a series of quick glimpses: the poet glances randomly at his surroundings rather than focusing intently on one specific spot.

By juxtaposing his observations and impressions to the refrain, Williams represents the artistic consciousness as continuous presence in the park—a mind searching among the particulars of the world for "a new / line" (50). The poet suffers another creative block, however, in Section II:

Blocked.

(Make a song out of that: concretely)

By whom?

In its midst rose a massive church. . . . And it
all came to me then—that those poor souls had nothing
else in the world, save that church between them and
the eternal stony, ungrateful and unpromising dirt
they lived by

(62)

With the appearance of the church, the poet's ongoing engagement with the land comes to a halt, as signed in the three periods. Although what follows seems to be an

epiphany of sorts, the encounter is ultimately detrimental to the creative process: the protagonist observes that the church and its doctrines serve mainly to distract the people from their daily toil, to divorce them from the land by which they live.¹⁴ In his encounter with the church, the poet experiences a similar cultural displacement. As a transplanted, European structure, the church suspends his "simple clarity of apprehension" (*Selected Essays* 71), and drives his "pacing foot outward / into emptiness" (*Paterson* 63). His aimless wandering brings him deep into "the Lord's line," to a makeshift "arena" set up in the park, where a preacher, who identifies himself in the text as Klaus Ehrens, begins delivering a lengthy, stultifying oration (62, 63).

Ehrens is from "the Old Country" (66), and purports to bring the spectators in the park "the truth through the outworn language of the church" (Sutton 247). The gravitation of the protagonist to the preacher's arena is a sign that his creative focus has been diverted from the land

¹⁴ Williams believed "the institutionalized church, like the university, to be outworn, to represent only a dead hand" (Engel 87). Such institutions, so the poet averred, cannot adequately serve the fundamental needs of Americans, rooted as they are in societal orders alien to the United States. There is ample evidence that Williams viewed the Christian church as such. See, for example, "The Fountain of Eternal Youth," "De Soto and the New World," and "Voyage of the Mayflower" (*In the American Grain*); Williams' letter to James Laughlin of 26 March 1939 (Witemeyer 40-41); and his essays "Against the Weather" and "The Poem as a Field of Action" (*Selected Essays*).

to a system of thought transplanted from Europe. Williams suggests this diversion of focus by incorporating excerpts of Ehrens' impassioned sermon into the text at various points throughout Section II. In addition, the passages of prose history interpolated with the sermon represent the associations triggered in the poet's mind during the preacher's speech. When Ehrens begins recounting his struggle for capitalist gain in "the Old Country" and in America (*Paterson* 67), the poet instantaneously draws a connection between the preacher's words and events in American history—specifically, Alexander Hamilton's desire to implement a European system of industrialist economics in America.¹⁵ This patchwork style manifests a new pattern of thought in the poet. As a speaker for an alien tradition, Ehrens draws the poet's mind into a reflection first on Christianity, and then on capitalism. When the preacher's sermon draws to a close at the end of Book Two, the protagonist of *Paterson* finds himself in a precarious position:

Caught (in mind)
beside the water he looks down, listens!

¹⁵ As Gilbert Seldes argues, Hamilton's was "the beginning of a financial system already tied up with industry which was to become more and more Europeanized as time went on; so we can say that Hamilton tried to impose upon the United States, which was beginning to expand, a financial system similar to that of England, which was beginning to contract" (cited from Sankey 96). Williams indicates, in "The Virtue of History," that his opinion of Hamilton was similar to that of Seldes (*In the American Grain* 195).

But discovers, still, no syllable in the confused
uproar: missing the sense (though he tries)
untaught but listening, shakes with the intensity
of his listening .

(*Paterson* 81)

Significantly, the poet returns to the rushing water, his primary metaphor in Book One for the creative process, for new inspiration. As evidence from the text makes clear enough, however, he remains displaced, alienated from the land. He teeters on the embankment, straining to "discover" an authentically local voice in the roar of the river. But his mind is inundated with (real or imagined) squabbling voices lamenting failed relationships, divorce—a din that forces him away from the river and into the library.

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE LIBRARY

Seeking a new means of organizing his world, the poet in Book Three turns to the city's past as recorded in the local histories stored in the library. The research process figures itself in the excerpts of prose history distributed throughout the book. The poet reads "more or less at random about the past of his region, hoping that in the past he can discover terms for understanding his own world," and for rendering that world artistically (*Sankey* 116). By immersing himself in local history, the poet may deepen or intensify his bond with the city and therefore strengthen his cultural identity. Paterson's cultural origins are, of

course, European. Yet, in researching the city's past, the protagonist aspires to gain some sense of how those origins became transmuted over time into a distinctly American identity. Thus, upon entering the building, the poet seems receptive to the possibilities the books offer: the dusty volumes, initially at least, are models of order and stability that might help him refocus his creative energy. "Books," he muses, "will give rest sometimes against / the uproar of water falling" (*Paterson* 97). He is quickly overwhelmed, however, by the suffocating sensation of being mired in "stagnation and death" (100); and his intolerance of the library's stifling atmosphere foreshadows the failure of his efforts, as the building quickly becomes for him as much of a "dead hand" as the church.³⁶ In addition, the stacks of books clamour, in a sense, in the poet's consciousness, with a din louder than that of the falls at the end of Book Two: "a roar of books / from the wadded library oppresses him / until / his mind begins to drift" (*Paterson* 100).

This failure finds expression in the lyrical passages interleaved between the prose excerpts—passages which convey the responses and associations invoked in the mind of the protagonist while he reads. At one point, for example,

³⁶ In a manuscript notebook, Williams describes the poet in Book Three as "searching for a language (in books) and failing" (cited from Sutton 248).

the poet researches a local figure, Harry Leslie, who attempted to cross the Passaic Falls on a tightrope. The protagonist may find Leslie intriguing because his 'art' is derived from his daring of a local power. Yet, something in the poet's experience with the book prompts a reaction to the "staleness" and "rot" of the library's atmosphere. Forcing himself to "Embrace the / foulness," the protagonist returns to Leslie's history (103).

This patchwork patterning figures a conflict in the poet's mind. The longer he reads, the more difficult it becomes for him to remain focused on the texts, the more they "enfeeble the mind's intent" (102). The point at which his mind is cast adrift coincides with the disappearance of the historical prose from Section I. A collage of lyrical passages focusing on three natural disasters suffered by the city in 1902 and 1903 (a tornado, a fire and a deluge) pictures the poet's daydream. The protagonist ruminates on the destructive capacity of these three forces of energy, their radical alteration or complete annihilation of, appropriately, the church and library. Together, the three disasters figure a complex in the poet, his resistance to the past, and a desire to escape the library that gradually intensifies as Book Three progresses. The protagonist envisions the tornado as a force similar to the rushing waters of the Passaic:

It pours
over the roofs of Paterson, ripping,

twisting, tortuous :

a wooden shingle driven half its length
into an oak

(the wind must have steeled
it, held it hard on both sides)

The church
moved 8 inches through an arc, on its
foundations—

(111)

As the tornado storms through Paterson, it gathers up the particulars of the area and reshapes the city by separating an old structure from new land. What the tornado does, in other words, is to loose those things that would block.

The reverie intensifies in Section II, becomes a consuming force of creative energy that purges the stagnant atmosphere of the library from the consciousness of the poet. Although he focuses predominantly on the Paterson fire, he concentrates very little on the actual written accounts of the disaster. Instead of reading about the fire in local histories, the poet recreates it in thought. The two small excerpts of the fire's history, strategically located at the beginning of the section (115, 116), trigger an extensive rumination that seems to feed on its own energy, dominating the text until the protagonist turns to focus on the Paterson flood in Section III. This extensive pattern of thought is rendered in the text as a collage of images, impressions, and speculations. The poet imagines buildings going up in a conflagration; and most significant among those buildings is the library:

But the pathetic library (that contained,
perhaps, not one volume of distinction)
must go down also—

BECAUSE IT IS SILENT. IT
IS SILENT BY DEFECT OF VIRTUE IN THAT IT
CONTAINS NOTHING OF YOU

That which should be
rare is trash; because it contains
nothing of you. They spit on you,
literally, but without you, nothing. The
library is muffled and dead

(122)

That the library "must go down" is both inevitable and necessary: the very scale of the Paterson fire assured the structure's annihilation. Yet, the passage also prefigures the poet's ultimate rejection of the library as an aid to creation, containing as it does nothing vital to him.³⁷

Williams details the protagonist's escape in Section III, with the use of another motif: the Paterson flood of 1903. The poet likens the swelling river to the texts inundating his consciousness.³⁸ As he continues reading, they become a "leaden flood"; they "mount and complicate them- / selves, lead to further texts and those / to synopses, digests and emendations" (130). A phantasmagoria of historical excerpts, disparate thoughts and impressions,

³⁷ Earlier in section II, Paterson had envisioned books burning in a doomed building as "men in hell," and gleefully proclaimed "their reign over the living ended" (115).

³⁸ Significantly, Williams envisions the Paterson flood drowning one of his early metaphors for the local poet: "A dog, head dropped back, under water, legs / sticking up : / a skin / tense with the wine of death" (131).

and disjointed phrases and words spoken by the citizens of Paterson body forth the flooding of the poet's mind (131-37). The receding of the flood waters at the end of Book Three coincides with the poet's exodus from the library, at which point he demonstrates that he has gained valuable insight from his sojourn: he cannot continue "looking into the past," but must find his "meaning" from within his experience, from within "the roar of the present" (145, 144). The past—even a *local* past—cannot 'found' the poet's art, since musty history cannot represent the "turmoil" of the contemporary age.³⁹

BOOK FOUR: THE RUN TO THE SEA

The final two books of *Paterson* represent the culmination of what has been a learning process. In Books Four and Five, Williams celebrates writers, visual artists, and scientists whose creations and discoveries have broken with conventional standards and beliefs, scientific principles, or artistic forms. In Book Four, Section II, he praises the accomplishments of Marie Curie, whose struggle against conventional scientific wisdom inspires his attempts to discover something "LUMINOUS" in his own environment

³⁹ The poet's reactions to the library are based on Williams' responses to it, relived during the writing of Book Three: "Book Three tells about the library. I even smelled the library. I hated it" (*I Wanted to Write a Poem* 83).

(*Paterson* 178).⁴⁰ He reflects on her experiments, on her failures and disappointments, and on her eventual success:

Ah Madam!
this is order, perfect and controlled
on which empires, alas, are built

But there may issue, a contaminant,
some other metal radioactive
a dissonance, unless the table lie,
may cure the cancer . must
lie in that ash .

(179)

The scientist's discovery of polonium and radium challenged the existing model of the Periodic Table of the Elements, and thus emblemizes for the poet a shattering of an old order. Curie discovered the vital "contaminant" from the process of experimentation, from her close study of pitchblende ('the thing') itself. Like the poet, she was "not indifferent to the past" and its established science, but "alert to what could not be fitted into the inherited molds" (*Sankey* 186).

Interspersed among the protagonist's reflections on Curie is a transcription of Allen Ginsberg's first letter to Williams (29 March 1950). In this letter, Ginsberg briefly outlines his interests as a young poet. Something of a traditionalist during the years of his apprenticeship, he

⁴⁰ Williams acknowledges the influence of Curie's and Meitner's discoveries on his poetics in an early typescript of Book Four: "The lecture on uranium (Curie), the splitting of the atom (first time explained to me) has a literary meaning... in the splitting of the foot..." (cited from *Thirlwall* 273).

gradually developed a new style: "I envision for myself some kind of new speech—different at least from what I have been writing down—in that it has to be a clear statement of fact about misery (and not misery itself), and splendor if there is any out of the subjective wanderings through *Paterson*" (Ginsberg, cited from *Paterson* 174). Ginsberg included a series of poems with his letter, seminal works written in the late forties, most in "an old style of lyric machinery," rhymed iambic tetrameter (174); this early material included a ballad and two odes. Yet, as this excerpt suggests, the neophyte was struggling at the time to develop a more personal style in his newer work, forms derived from "the splendor of actual experience," from his "incursions" into a living world (212). The presence of these two influential figures in the mind of the protagonist signs clearly enough the nature of his artistic creed.

Williams conceived of *Paterson*—until 1951, at least—as a four-book poem. With the publication of Book Three (1949), he offered this summary of his great work: "From the beginning I decided there would be four books following the course of the river, whose life seemed more and more to resemble my own life as I more and more thought of it: the river above the Falls, the catastrophe of the Falls itself, the river below the Falls, and the entrance at the end into the great sea" (cited from Thirlwall 254). Attempting to give voice to the parallel that he perceived between the

relentless, seaward movement of the river and the progress of his life, Williams brought his protagonist closer to an imminent demise as the poem progressed. Yet, by 1951, he had developed a new strategy: "It wouldn't do to have a grand and soul satisfying conclusion because I didn't see any in my subject. Nor was I going to be confused or depressed or evangelical about it. It didn't belong to the subject. It would have been easy to make a great smash up with a 'beautiful' sunset at sea, or a flight of pigeons, love's end and the welter of man's fate." In this press-release concerning Book Four, Williams repudiates the originally proposed structure, declaring that the subject matter did not warrant a conventional, "soaring climax" and conclusion (cited from Martz 519). The poet feared that, in creating a death for his aged hero, he would be imposing an artificial ending on the poem. In addition, the "grand and soul satisfying conclusion" that he originally envisioned for the epic involved bringing the protagonist out of his milieu and to the east coast of North America to die, looking across the ocean toward Europe—a translation, as it were, of his creative spirit to an alien continent, the culture and literary conventions he had eschewed throughout his quest.

Thus, at the end of Book Four, Williams turns his protagonist away from the sea and from the death that awaits him there:

American poet's independence.

The significance of the dog now becomes more apparent. In *The Odyssey*, no one recognizes Ulysses upon his return to Ithaca, save his aged nurse and his faithful dog. The dog is one of two that, in effect, reintegrate the ruler with his kingdom. In *Paterson*, the dog has been more than a faithful companion to the poet; it has been a kindred spirit, an emblem of his connections to America. It is thus appropriate that the dog accompany the protagonist as he turns inland once more to continue the work begun by Whitman. By reinvoking the dog at the end of Book Four, Williams thus recasts the Odyssean return, such that the poet ironically regains his own kingdom rather than inheriting an alien culture: "*Paterson IV* ends with the protagonist breaking through the bushes, identifying himself with the land, with America" (Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem* 22).

THREE DECADES OF "LIVING FICTION": BOOK FIVE⁴¹

On the dust jacket of *Paterson V*, the author claimed that "there can be no end to such a story I have envisioned with the terms which I had laid down for myself" (cited from Sutton 259). *Paterson* is a poem about the creative process itself, about ongoing artistic discovery; thus, what the

⁴¹ *Paterson* 234.

poet's consciousness demands for Williams is a resolute open-endedness. Breslin, Duffey, and Peterson view Book Five as the poem's coda;⁴² and, certainly, the book is like a coda in that its form is distinct from the rest of the composition (Williams' celebrated triadic line being the dominant measure). Yet, in other and, I would argue, more important respects, the book bears little or no resemblance to a coda. As his comment on Book Five suggests, Williams fully intended to continue his "story" by adding further books to *Paterson*. In fact, the appendix to the poem indicates that he had projected a sixth book, and had begun composing it in 1961, just two years prior to his death.⁴³ One could thus argue that Book Five concludes the epic only insofar as it was the last book that Williams completed. One could also argue, perhaps even more aptly, that the surviving fragments of the unfinished Book Six provide the poem with a more appropriate *dis-closure*.

Rather than offering "a grand and soul satisfying conclusion" at the end of Book Four, then, Williams widens the meditative consciousness represented in the poem as a whole. In Book Five, the hero finds himself in The Cloisters, a branch of the New York Metropolitan Museum of

⁴² See Breslin's *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist* (206), Duffey's *A Poetry of Presence* (91), and Peterson's *An Approach to "Paterson"* (11).

⁴³ *Paterson* 241-246.

Interesting to note in Book Five is the seeming absence of any hostility toward the art of the past. Further, whereas the library and its books served to block creativity in the poet, the museum and its exhibits seem distinctly generative of lively action. As the poem indicates, this apparent reconciliation between the hero and the past could be due, in part, to the fact that he is now a decade older and may not feel as antagonistic toward established art, his accomplishments and reputation having secured his place in American letters:

(230-31)

Years of artistic struggle and a tireless dedication to educating "the young" have earned the poet the role of

mentor to a new generation of writers. The fact that they seek his counsel indicates his success as an innovator in poetic form; the young look not to the literature of the past for artistic models, but to his persistent efforts to shape the American idiom into a new poetic measure. Thus, the poet is perhaps no longer dominated by his urgent, almost competitive need to dismiss all traditional art. Yet, though he is more receptive in Book Five to the past than he has been throughout the poem to that point, his interest seems to be restricted to artists in whose work he sees resemblances to his own poetic theory and method.⁴⁴

As the poet walks through the museum, scrutinizing the tapestries there, he ruminates on other artists. Williams simulates this perceptual process by contextualizing a series of reflections within a framework of visual observation (*Paterson* 208, 215-16, 231-38). The viewing of the Millefleurs Tapestry evokes in the poet's mind a "self-constructed temple of art" (Duffey 92) shaped from the litany of artists that dominates Sections I and II. Williams fills this temple with "rebels who attacked or

⁴⁴ "The subject matter of the Unicorn tapestries," Guimond notes, "is a mythical event—the supposed hunting and capture of a unicorn by the court of Louis XII of France. But the tapestries are vividly realistic. The life which the weavers saw around them is depicted, with great accuracy, in the flowers, in the faces of the huntsmen and courtiers, and in the bloody details of the hunt which are woven into the tapestries. It is this same vivid presence of the artist's immediate world in his art which Williams praises in Brueghel's *Nativity*" (501).

ignored what was academically proper and traditional in their own times," who, "in one way or another broke the continuity between themselves and their cultural pasts" (Guimond 501). And another letter from Ginsberg appears.⁴⁵ In addition, the poet praises the work of Jackson Pollock, jazz improvisation, the "curious immediate quality" of words in Gertrude Stein's writings (Williams, *Selected Essays* 114), and "the experiential sweep of the imagination" that Juan Gris attempted to capture in his paintings (Fure 17).

This grouping of talismanic figures leads to the climax at the end of Section II, rendered in triadic measure:

The neat figures of
 Paul Klee
 fill the canvas
 but that
 is not the work
 of a child
 the cure began, perhaps
 with the abstraction
 of Arabic art
 Dürer
 with his *Melancholy*
 was aware of it—
 the shattered masonry. Leonardo
 saw it,
 the obsession,
 and ridiculed it
 in *La Gioconda*.
 Bosch's

⁴⁵ In this letter, Ginsberg thanks Williams for his introduction to *Empty Mirror*, a short piece in which the elder poet commended Ginsberg's recognition that "the rhythms of the past have become like an old field long left unploughed and fallen into disuse." Williams notes that Ginsberg's poetry is measured "without accent," measured, rather, according to "the shuffling of human beings in all the stages of their day" ("Introduction to *Empty Mirror*" 809).

congeries of tortured souls and devils
 who prey on them
 fish
 swallowing
 their own entrails
 Freud
 Picasso
 Juan Gris.

(*Paterson* 222)

Since its inception, Williams' triadic measure has received much attention, although critics have not yet arrived at a consensus regarding its nature and use. Marc Hofstadter argues that the triadic line is a "unit of syntax," each segment "delineating" a phrase or clause (458). Yet, as one may gauge from the excerpt quoted immediately above, Hofstadter's reading is somewhat difficult to substantiate or endorse.⁴⁶ Marjorie Perloff, on the other hand, has defined the triadic line as a "visual form," a kind of successor "to such visual stanzas as the quatrains of 'The Nightingales' and 'This Is Just To Say'" ("To Give a Design" 181). This interpretation is also problematic, for Perloff neglects to take into account Williams' efforts to create a

⁴⁶ It is not unreasonable to test Hofstadter's thesis on a reading of *Paterson V*, since the critic focuses on Williams' later poetry. Indeed, the passage quoted above appears in *Journey to Love* (1955), in a separate poem entitled, "Tribute to the Painters," and so qualifies as part of Williams' later work. Also, Hofstadter is very selective in his approach. To demonstrate that Williams' triadic measure is a "syntactical unit" (458), the critic isolates excerpts of poems in which every segment comprises a phrase or clause. Yet, even a cursory glance through the poems of *The Desert Music* (1954) and *Journey to Love* will demonstrate that single-word segments are considerably more abundant than Hofstadter would have us believe.

measure that would reflect the accent and intonation of American speech, and the writer's personal experience in the contemporary age. Further, Perloff's reading of the triadic line as "an externally imposed geometric form, a kind of cookie cutter" or "gay wallpaper" trivializes what Williams believed to be the defining achievement of his experiments with poetic measure (181, 182). For while "the three-step line creates an attractive shape," its function in Williams' poetry transcends the purely cosmetic role that Perloff assigns it (181).

My own sense is that the triadic measure of Williams' later poetry represents a modification of the variable foot. In his famous letter to Richard Eberhart (23 May 1954), Williams defines his triadic measure as a temporal unit comprising three isochronous segments, each segment being one beat in duration. Perloff dismisses this formula and readings that support it. Instancing an excerpt from Williams' "Of Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," she argues that there is no consistency in the length of the individual line-segments that would support the poet's claim for such uniformity. Yet, Perloff fails to grasp the fundamental ground of Williams' theory because she mistakenly attempts to conceptualize the temporal structure of the triadic line in terms of its visual appearance on the page. And as Denise Levertov argues in a later study of Williams' triadic

measure, the poet did not score his lines for the eye.⁴¹

In the letter to Eberhart, Williams describes his measure in Poundian terms, as "musical pace" (*Selected Letters* 326). The variation in the length of individual line-segments approximates the subtle shifts in the tempo of the poet's speech or thought, or in the intensity of the emotion expressed in the work. Williams orchestrated the printed text of a poem the way a composer scores a piece of music, dictating the tempo of individual phrases or measures through the use of various types of notes. In music, the composer scores the measure according to a specific time signature. For example, in common time, two whole notes of two beats each, or four quarter notes of one beat each, or eight half notes (and so on) will produce the four beats per measure indicated by the signature. The more notes per measure, the shorter they must be, and the faster the tempo seems when the musician plays them. Similarly, in Williams' triadic line, the greater the number of words in a segment, the quicker the pace at which it is appropriately read. Shorter segment-lengths, with their suggestion that the poet is "waiting, pondering, or hesitating," would demand a slower pace of speech from the reader (Levertov, "On Williams' Triadic Line" 143). In the text of a poem like "Of Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" or *Paterson V*, the reader

⁴¹ See her "On Williams' Triadic Line" 143.

thus has a precise script to follow in replaying the rhythm and intensity of the poet's speech or thought.

The artists that the protagonist invokes created significant work by combining traditional and contemporary styles of composition, or by shunning conventional techniques altogether in favour of making painting new. The poem proceeds in accordance with the associations triggered during a process of contemplation; and the first two triads feature reflections on the work of Paul Klee.⁴⁸ The development of the poet's thoughts on this artist and his work is conveyed by the scoring of the individual line-segments: in the first triad, the protagonist focuses on a particular piece; the picture gradually forms in his mind, first the specific details (the "neat figures") and then the overall composition. The picture is the visual focus that prompts the protagonist's general assessment of Klee's work in the second triad.

The poet experiences a certain degree of difficulty in verbalizing his perspective on Dürer's "Melancholia." The dash at the end of the fourth triad marks a brief pause in thought, as the protagonist struggles to clarify his point of view. The poet's final observation on Dürer is deferred to the first segment of the fifth triad. The fact that this

⁴⁸ Weary with established conventions of drawing and painting, Klee desired to paint "as though newborn, knowing absolutely nothing about Europe" (cited from Hughes 304). This desire fuelled his interest in primitive art and the art of children.

observation impinges upon his rumination on Da Vinci suggests that it constitutes a kind of afterthought; just as he turns to another artist, the poet suddenly recalls a relevant detail from "Melancholia" that he believes validates his perception that Dürer helped facilitate the "cure" of art in Germany.⁴⁹

The final segment of the sixth triad marks a shift in the poet's focus, from Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" to a painting by Bosch.⁵⁰ Williams does not identify the piece, but the description in the text calls to mind that painter's famous "Hell" panel from the triptych *Garden of Delights*. The composition is extremely complex, the subject matter displaying countless scenes of pandemonium and confusion, of torture and hedonistic self-indulgence. All natural laws have collapsed in this inferno, where many of the suffering

⁴⁹ The first German artist to experiment with the contemporary styles of Italian art, Dürer was the founder of the High Renaissance in his native country: "Dürer became the first northern artist to travel to Italy expressly to study Italian art and its underlying theories at their source. After his first journey in 1495 ... it became his life mission to bring the modern—that is, the Italian Renaissance—style north and establish it there" (Gardner 608).

⁵⁰ The paintings of the Mediaeval masters were "imbued with the solemnity of divine service"; with the work of Hieronymus Bosch, however, art began "to shake off the tutelage of the Church." Many of his contemporaries "were content to solve formal problems within the framework of the old religious themes," whereas Bosch created religious allegories using subject matter drawn from daily life, for to him, "art was a language which he used to express a view of the world" (de Tolnay 10, 12).

are represented as horribly mishappen, with sinister combinations of human and animal anatomies. Not surprisingly, then, the poet is overwhelmed by the piece. Williams conveys this state of mind by deferring the conclusion of his ruminations until the eighth triad.

The first segment of the seventh triad establishes the poet's focus on the chaotic and confusing detail that dominates Bosch's painting. In accordance with Williams' theory, the length of the segment demands that we proceed relatively swiftly in our reading, and this helps to convey the clutter-effect of images that pour into the mind of the protagonist during his rumination on the piece. The radical diminishment in length from the first segment to the third suggests a shift in focus, from the composition in general to a single detail. This shift is reinforced by the slower pace demanded in our reading of the third segment.

In Book Five, Williams manifests a perceptual process that is as much a "living fiction" as the tapestries themselves. At the end of his excursion, he champions the poet's music: "The measure intervenes, to measure is all we know" (239). The poet is self-assured, this claim a concise and definitive proclamation of his credo. The triadic line provided Williams with a means of representing the hero's struggle to know the world. Throughout the composition of *Paterson*, Williams endeavoured to represent feelings, thoughts, and perceptions to the reader through measure.

The variable foot offered him a means of diversifying his presentation, of shaping each experience according to its needs, whether his protagonist was situated on the banks of the Passaic, in Garrett Park, in a public library, or in an art museum. As Robert Creeley observes, poetic form in Williams' work is "a precise issue of its occasion" (*Collected Essays* 45).

CHAPTER 3

TRACKING THE MIND: ROBERT CREELEY'S *HELLO*

In his "Foreword to *The Manuscripts and Letters of William Carlos Williams*," Robert Creeley extols Williams' virtues as a mentor to young American poets in the fifties: "For those of my own age, as Allen Ginsberg and Denise Levertov, he was intensely responsive and reassuring, always there to answer the endless letters we wrote to him, despite failing health in the latter years of his life. He was truly our hero, and we knew that he would hear us" (*Collected Essays* 48). Creeley's praise is not simple hero worship, but a heartfelt acknowledgement of the role Williams played in the development of postwar American poetics. Certainly, we see the influence of this "hero" in the work of writers like Ginsberg and Levertov. But that influence is perhaps more evident in the work of Creeley: discussing his volume *Mirrors* in a 1991 interview, Creeley claims that the act of writing is for him a means of "tracking the mind" (cited from Elliott 61), a way of creating a precise record of a life being lived.

Like Williams, Creeley shunned conventional forms as ill-suited to his needs as a contemporary writer. In his "A Note on Poetry" (1953), for example, he invokes Williams' repeated disparagement of the sonnet to make the case for his own conviction that the American poet who uses imported

forms perforce does nothing new or distinctively American:

When Williams beats on the sonnet, and he has done it I think brilliantly—he is hitting at a usage which denies form now. In short—that implies we ourselves are incapable—as our predecessors were of course *not*—of invention, of finding in the direct context of what we know, where we are, an exact means to form—which will be the direct issue of such contact. The sonnet says, in short, we must talk, if you want, with another man's mouth, in the peculiar demands of that "mouth," and that we can't have our own.

(Creeley, *Quick Graph* 26)

Creeley's earthy imaging of "voice" by "mouth" effectively conveys his belief that American writers must put old and foreign forms behind them, since, as Williams argues, a truly indigenous art can evolve only from within the poet's social, political, and economic climate, from within personal experience itself.⁵¹ Acting on that conviction, Creeley devised a means of representing the mind in the very process of apprehending the world. His poetic innovations

⁵¹ Creeley was also inspired as a young writer by Charles Olson, jazz, and the Abstract Expressionists, as he notes in his interviews with Linda Wagner, Kevin Power, and David Elliott, and in his preface to *All That is Lovely in Men* (*Quick Graph* 4).

involved a complex movement toward greater spontaneity in the act of composition, as he suggests in his most detailed statement on his poetic method, "I'm given to write poems" (1967): "I cannot anticipate their occasion.... I cannot anticipate the necessary conclusions of the activity, nor can I judge in any sense, in moments of writing, the significance of that writing more than to recognize that it is being *permitted* to continue. I'm trying to say that, in writing, at least as I have experienced it, one is *in* the activity" (Creeley, *Collected Essays* 496).⁵² Creeley envisions himself not as an 'overseer' of experience, imposing form upon his world, but as a receiver of such impulses and information from that world as shape his art.⁵³ In response to the conventional assumption that it is the duty of the artist to shape experience into some "final code of significance" (Creeley, *Contexts* 42), Creeley postulates that, to a certain degree, he lacks control over the artistic process; he cannot predict which experiences will form the basis of art, nor can he predetermine the shape in which these experiences will find poetic expression. In his work, then, the traditional "'subject'

⁵² The title of Creeley's essay is perhaps derived in part from a line in Whalen's poem "Technicalities for Jack Spicer": "It has been given me to say" (*On Bear's Head* 196).

⁵³ Creeley also expresses this perception of the poet as receiver in his interviews with Linda Wagner (177-81) and William Spanos (20).

as a conceptual focus or order ... give[s] place to the literal activity of the writing itself" (*Collected Essays* 93). Content, for Creeley, cannot be "separated from the process of creation itself, for in a sense, the content is the process of creation" (Taetzsch 16).⁵⁴

Creeley's view of poetic form is closely tied to this notion of subject matter as process. In a letter of 5 June 1950 to Olson, Creeley observes that the prevailing attitudes of artists and scholars of his day toward poetic form have rendered the term "so useless" to him "that [he] blush[es] to use it" in any meaningful discussion of contemporary poetry and poetics (cited from Butterick 79). Appalled that in the 1950s a poet should put "weight, first: on form," Creeley offers Olson an unconventional perspective, insisting that "form is never more than an extension of content" (78, 79).⁵⁵ He rejects the received notion of "form"—"form that is viewed as prior, and

⁵⁴ Charles Altieri argues that Creeley views "the activity of thinking [as] a subject in its own right" ("Poetics of Conjecture" 516).

⁵⁵ This letter is, apparently, the source to which Olson refers in the second tenet of his manifesto. In his letter of 8 June 1950 to Creeley, Olson responds enthusiastically to the younger poet's definition of form, praising it as "most USABLE" (cited from Butterick 85). While the letters of this period do not indicate the exact date that Olson completed the final draft of "Projective Verse," they do show that he was still revising the essay in May and June. The final version appeared for the first time in *Poetry New York* (October 1950), with Creeley's definition of "form" included.

therefore possibly irrelevant, to the experience at hand" (Kern 216)—striving instead to achieve a close correspondence between the structure of a poem and its subject matter. And the poet may achieve that correspondence, Creeley argues, only during the act of composition: "What I deny, then, is any assumption that order can be either acknowledged or gained by intellectual assertion, or will, or some like intention to shape language to a purpose which the literal act of writing does not itself discover" (*Collected Essays* 486).⁵⁶

Understandably, then, Creeley's theory finds its truest expression in his process poetry:

Sometime in the mid-sixties I grew inexorably
bored with the tidy containment of clusters of
words on single pieces of paper called "poems"—
"this will really get them, wrap it up...."
I could see nothing in my life nor those of others
adjacent that supported this single hits theory....
[M]y own life, I felt increasingly, was a
continuance, from wherever it had started to
wherever it might end.

⁵⁶ In his interview with Spanos, Creeley uses this colourful analogy to clarify his stance on poetic form: "let's say what happens when you take a glass of water and just dump it on the floor? The fact of water the content inherently of water discovers a form a form specific to its 'nature' to put it loosely on the surface it meets with. No *idea* of water will change that situation..." (Spanos 22) (spacing as in original text).

(Creeley, *Collected Essays* 574)

Creeley cites a significant change in his genre of preference, from the short lyric that predominated in his first two major collections, to the extended forms with which he began experimenting in the mid-sixties.⁵⁷ In the individual poems of *For Love* (1962) and *Words* (1967), Creeley typically locates the reader within a heightened moment of awareness—an event already in progress, an observation or introspection, or a revelatory experience. The lyric, with its brevity and compactness, especially suited the poet's early sense of writing as "singleness of occurrence" (Creeley, *Collected Essays* 575).

At some point during the composition of *Words*, however, Creeley became more sensitive to the fact that the mind is multidimensional, its activity continuous—a realization that highlighted for the poet an inherent limitation of the lyric. Specifically, that form restricted his ability faithfully to represent the flux of thought. *Pieces* (1969) and *A Day Book* (1972) mark his first major attempts to record prolonged periods of mental activity. In each of these volumes, Creeley interweaves "elliptical patterns and fragments" (Ford 45) within a patchwork structure, in order to represent the multidimensionality of the mind and the

⁵⁷ The poet also discusses this transitional period in his interview with Robert Sheppard (42-44).

continuity of a sustained creative process.⁵⁸

Hello has a more linear structure than either *Pieces* or *A Day Book*. The book is a record of a lecture tour that Creeley undertook in the South Pacific during 1976—a pivotal point in his life. When the trip began, Creeley's second marriage (to Bobbie Louise Hawkins) was on the verge of collapse. Approaching his fiftieth birthday at that time, the poet felt an urgent need to begin his life anew. "I knew, intuitively, a time in myself had come for change," he recalls in his "A Note for *Hello*" (Creeley, *Collected Essays* 579). Undertaking this process of self-renewal meant, for Creeley, a turning away from his past life to embrace the discontinuity of an adventurous life on the road: "Creeley takes on his central concern, namely to stay within the flux of time without imposing memory or vision on the experience of the moment. As he puts it, the mind that lingers solely in the past estranges the individual from life.... Only in the total awareness and experience of the here and now can life be captured in its full essence" (Rausser 132). The frenetic pace of the tour carries the poet along from moment to moment. By tapping into the living energy of the present, Creeley hopes to surmount an

⁵⁸ Sherman Paul's "A Letter on Rosenthal's 'Problems of Robert Creeley'" offers an excellent reading of the poet's technique in *Pieces* and *A Day Book*. Paul stresses the importance of the extended form to Creeley's work of the late sixties.

overwhelming sense of emptiness and loss. The poet is constantly "trying to get bearings," to "keep / it... / together" (Creeley, *Hello* 35, 20), as he negotiates his way through several foreign landscapes and a myriad of emotions and memories.

As *Hello*'s subtitle suggests, the format of the volume resembles a diary's; a chronological sequence of poems and notations forms the structural framework within which an extended mental process evolves: "*Hello* records two interlaced experiences, one an intense emotional struggle to come to terms with loneliness and the other a literal whirlwind tour of Southeast Asia.... This actual trip is the solid background against which the narrator's emotional journal plays itself out" (Edelberg, "Creeley's Orphan Lines" 158).⁵⁹ Each entry or notation of the journal presents the poet's sensory, intellectual, and emotional responses to an experience. These include his observations of his surroundings, his introspections on ageing and death, his retrospections, and his feelings of disorientation, alienation, and loneliness, prompted at times by the momentum of the trip, by his unfamiliarity with the places that he visits, and by recent circumstances in his personal life. The book is thus a "periplus," a map-in-progress of

⁵⁹ Creeley was perhaps inspired during the composition of *Hello* by Williams' *The Descent of Winter*, also written as a journal.

the poet's self-exploration, of his ongoing struggle to find in the present the means to self-redefinition.⁶⁰

In "Soup," for example, the poet attempts to overcome his sense of loss by looking to find distractions in his surroundings. The initial stanzas demonstrate that he is preoccupied with the failure of his relationship with his wife:

I know what you'd say
if I could ask you—
but I'm tired of it—
no word, nothing again.

Letter from guy says,
"she looks well,
happy, working hard—"

(*Hello* 9)

While it is not made explicit, Bobbie is the likely subject of the poet's musings. To a certain degree, the identities of both husband and wife have been shaped by the shared experiences of twenty years. The thoughts and feelings lived together have given the two an inherent understanding of each other; and the poet's capacity to predict the responses of his wife demonstrates that those connections are still very much part of him, despite the prospect of an impending divorce.

⁶⁰ "Berlin: First Night & Early Morning," from Creeley's volume *Away* (1976), anticipates the poet's achievement in *Hello*. Creeley is also on the road in this earlier poem-as-travelogue, visiting unfamiliar places, and experiencing the loneliness of being separated from his wife. However, perhaps because the poem is relatively short, it seems to lack the emotional depth of *Hello*.

From its very opening, "Soup" bespeaks a basic conflict in the poet: he is at once instinctively drawn to the familiar and eager for change. His weariness with the silences in their disintegrating relationship, coupled with his discovery that Bobbie is beginning to rebuild her life, prompts him "to get on with" his own. In the next two stanzas, Creeley decides to abandon any further attempts to renew his connections with her, and instead turns to Palmerston North (in New Zealand) for stability. This transition is virtually instantaneous. A self-directed imperative, "Forget it," closes the second stanza, which evinces painful reflections of the Bobbie he remembers. The dichotomy represented in the following stanza helps to convey the sudden shift in his attention:

I'm not there.
I'm really here,
sitting,
with my hat on.

(9)

The poet's attempt psychologically to distance himself from Bobbie is encapsulated in his insistent claim that he is "not there." Creeley then begins to focus on the "here" and now of Palmerston North; and the placement of "there" and "here" in consecutive lines suggests the sudden, yet deliberate, character of that shift in focus.

In the following stanza, the poet attempts to strengthen his bond with the community. With his claim that he is "not alone in this," Creeley attempts to immerse

himself in a community celebrating "a great day / in New Zealand" (9). He then turns to look out the window and focuses on a new experience unfolding before him:

Lady out window hangs clothes,
reds and blues—
basket, small kid,
clothespins in mouth.

(10)

The passage simulates a panning motion. The fact that the poet specifically notices the red and blue clothes is significant, suggesting as it does a reference to at least one national flag. American Creeley spends much of his time in this piece struggling to develop a sense of what it means to be a New Zealander. Halfway through the poem, for example, he proclaims that he is beginning to understand the conditions of life "down under" (10).

After thoroughly observing his surroundings, Creeley acknowledges the necessity of "letting go" of the past, for "each life's / got its own condition // to find, / to get on with":

May I let this be
West Acton, and
myself six? No,
I don't travel that way

despite memories,
all the dear or awful
passages apparently
I've gone through.

(10)

Creeley spent his childhood in this small, rural community of Massachusetts. In this excerpt, the poet denies that he

can achieve self-renewal through a confrontation of the past, of "fixed self-images" (Mazzaro 64). Creeley acknowledges that it is only his immediate experience that may provide him with the means of reshaping his identity—even experiences as unpleasant as "the weather" and the "dripping nose" of his head-cold (*Hello* 11).

This progress toward self-renewal is retarded whenever the poet lapses into memory, whenever the past impinges upon his consciousness. Creeley begins his stay in Hamilton, New Zealand, by attempting to familiarize himself with his surroundings:

Magnolia tree out window
 here in Hamilton—
 years and years ago
 the house, in France,
 called *Pavillion des Magnolias*,
 where we lived and Charlotte
 was born, and time's gone
 so fast—.

(17-18)

The Magnolia tree, initially a focal point for the poet, triggers a memory from his first marriage (which ended in divorce in 1954). The dash at the end of the second line signs the sudden arrestation in the visual process, as the poet inadvertently begins to ground himself in an identity of "years and years ago." Often in the volume, such reminiscences are accompanied by feelings of disorientation and displacement—feelings of intense isolation in the poet, a sense that he is "sitting ... in limbo" (28), overwhelmed

by a "sick loss / feeling" (33). This dilemma is especially evident in the poem "Men."

The first three stanzas of this poem recreate a visual process, the protagonist's observation of a picture posted on the wall of the hotel:

Here, on the wall
of this hotel in
Singapore, there's a

picture, of a woman,
big-breasted, walking,
blue-coated, with

smaller person—both
followed by a house men
are carrying.

(28)⁶¹

The poet begins by scrutinizing the woman: her breasts, her ambulation, and the colour of her coat. The enjambment of the second and third stanzas at the preposition manifests a sudden shift in focus—from the woman to her companion. The pronoun "both" signals another change in perspective—from the couple to their entourage.

⁶¹ "Men" comprises six fragments. Creeley uses a single dot to divide one notation from the next. In his interview with Michael André, the poet recalls his use of a similar technique in *Pieces*: "I simply used the chronological sequence of its writing and let, say, three dots indicate that that was the end of a day's accumulation, and the single dots most usually indicate divisions in the writing as it's happening, as I was sitting down to do it" (Creeley, *Contexts* 192). Creeley signifies the end of a day's writing in *Hello* not with three dots, but with the date of the poem's composition. As in *Pieces*, the subdivisions in *Hello* (the single dots) represent any pauses or interruptions that may occur in a single day's writing.

The poster evokes a negative emotional response in the poet, feelings once again of disorientation and displacement:

Getting fainter, in the world,
fearing something's fading,
deadened, tentative responses—
go hours without eating,
scared without someone to be
with me. These empty days.

(*Hello* 29)

In this fragment, the second of the poem, Creeley tracks a process of self-assessment that becomes more acute as the piece proceeds. Each line offers a "tentative response," an attempt by the poet to clarify his emotional state. The phrase "scared without someone to be with me" voices the author's fear of being alone. Yet, Creeley's subtle manipulation of the line provides for the possibility of another, overlapping interpretation. The "terminal juncture" at the verb "be" throws the conceptual focus of the line on an absence of self—Creeley does not have "someone to be" because he is now alone, because his 'being' has been defined in part by a twenty-year marriage that is now over.⁶² The scoring of the line helps sign not merely his feelings of loneliness, but also his disturbing feeling that he is, in a figurative sense, disappearing.

Flailing around for some sense of stability, the poet

⁶² Creeley defines the "distinct pause" at the end of a line as a "terminal juncture" (*Collected Essays* 491).

(inadvertently, it would seem) grounds himself in a familiar self-image. Creeley's introspection deepens in the third fragment of the piece:

Growth, trees, out window's
 reminiscent of other days,

 other places, years ago,
 a kid in Burma, war,

 fascinated, in jungle,
 happily not shot at,

 hauling the dead and dying
 along those impossible roads

 to nothing much could help.
 Dreaming, of home, the girl

 left behind, getting drunk,
 getting laid, getting beaten

 out of whorehouse one night.
 So where am I now.

(29)

Creeley attempts to focus on what appears to be a tranquil scene, but the growth outside the window only serves to remind him of his past. The terminal juncture at the end of the first line marks the beginning of a reminiscence on other days, on his tour of duty in Burma during World War II. The enjambed couplets of this fragment track the poet's memory as it plays out.⁶¹ Creeley becomes caught up in a labyrinth of painful feelings, negative associations, and

⁶¹ In *Hello*, Creeley's use of enjambment often conveys a sense of "becoming, of things not yet whole, of an intelligence searching for completion among many possibilities" (Diehl 338).

violent and disorienting memories, until, at the climax of the poem, he suffers a momentary loss of bearings. "So where am I now," Creeley asks of himself, as he struggles once more to surrender himself to the experience of the here and now.

As the poet proceeds on his tour, his pain and disorientation are somewhat alleviated. The longer that Creeley travels, the further he is able to distance himself from the memories and emotions that dominated his consciousness at the beginning of the tour. Cynthia Dubin Edelberg argues that the first indications of healing in the poet can be found in "Things To Do in Tokyo." In this piece, she claims, the poet is "completely engaged" in the experience of the present for the first time in the book ("Creeley's Orphan Lines" 160). This development, I would argue, occurs somewhat earlier in the volume, in "Cebu." Creeley begins the poem with a reference to Ferdinand Magellan, an appropriate point of departure. A member of the first expedition to circumnavigate the globe, Magellan perhaps serves as a role model for the poet in his quest for healing. Magellan's task was to ascertain the existence of a direct route westward from Europe, through the Americas, to the East Indies. While the explorer likely relied on his knowledge of established nautical routes to guide the expedition to the Americas, once there he necessarily could not draw upon existing theories of the new world to help him

accomplish his task. Magellan would have had to surrender himself and his crew to the terrain disclosed on the journey to ensure the expedition the greatest chance of success. Like the explorer, whose consciousness was effectively reshaped by the discoveries he made, Creeley leaves behind familiar boundaries and frames of reference in the process of surrendering himself to new ground.

Despite all such attempts to surrender himself to the experience of the present, Creeley remains enthralled by his past throughout his tours of New Zealand, Australia, and Singapore. "Cebu" marks a new beginning for the poet, however:

Driving in from the airport,
hot, trying to get bearings—

witness easy seeming pace of the place,
banana trees, mangos, the high

vine grapes on their trellises.
But particularly the people moseying

along.

(Hello 35)

The form of the passage is determined by the protagonist's attempt "to get bearings" on a fertile, agricultural area. Creeley tracks an unfolding process of observation, from a general, panoramic view of the locale to a focus on its specific details. Each line conveys a new impression. The third line of the excerpt registers the intellectual response of the poet to his environment: the place instills

in him a sense that life in Cebu is conducted at a leisurely pace. For the most part, the poet focuses on the idyllic aspects of Cebu, beginning with the orchards and groves that he sees on the trip into the city. The fifth line of the passage signs the terminus of that observation, and the beginning of another: the simplicity of life in Cebu. The enjambment of the third and fourth couplets suggests the leisurely pace of the pedestrian traffic observed by the poet.

As Creeley continues to scrutinize his surroundings, he establishes a kind of bond with the city:

and I like these houses here,
open-sided, thatched roofed—

that could all be gone in a flash,
or molder more slowly

back into humus. One doesn't
finally want it all forever,

not stopped there, in abstract
time. Whatever, it's got to

be yielded, let go of, it can't
live any longer than it has to.

Being human, at times I
get scared, of dying, growing

old, and think my body's
possibly the exception to all

that I know has to happen.

(36-37)

The excerpt proceeds by association, from an act of perception to the intellectual responses of the poet to what he sees. The thatched-roofed houses prompt Creeley to

envision their deterioration or ultimate destruction. This vision in turn triggers his reflection on his own impending demise; like the houses, the author will eventually "molder... // back into humus." The transition, from observation to reflection, simulates the link that the poet draws between himself as an ageing man and the decaying buildings of Cebu, both being participants in a natural cycle of change. When his attention returns to the banana trees, his perspective on them has altered. He no longer views them as a crop enriching the area agriculturally, but speculates that "some of those // bananas are already rotten" (37).

"Cebu" marks a pivotal point in Creeley's psychological rebirth; by attuning himself to the energy of his surroundings, the poet begins to emerge from his entrapment in the past. At the end of the poem, Creeley as explorer vows to "let what / world [he does] have be the world" (37). The revelation that the poet receives in Cebu is, to appropriate Edelberg's term, "cathartic" ("Creeley's Orphan Lines" 160):

MORNING

Dam's broke,
head's a
waterfall.

(Hello 38)

This fragment, which follows "Cebu," ostensibly describes the clearing of Creeley's head cold. Yet one could also

read the piece as a declaration of emancipation; "All the junk that goes with being human / Drops away" from the mind of the poet (Snyder, *Riprap* 8), disembodying him of his past. The brevity of the fragment reinforces the sense of suddenness in the release.

From this point in the tour, Creeley's thoughts and perspectives are shaped much more by immediate experience.⁶⁴ In "Lunch and After," for example, the poet facilitates a redefinition of self by moving "out and into this / physical, endless place" (Kuala Lumpur), by establishing himself as a vital element of a dynamic landscape:

Sun's dazzling shine now
back of the towering clouds,

and sounds of builders'
pounding, faint, distant

buzz of traffic. Mirror's
in front of me, hat's on

head, under it, human
face, my face, reddened,

it seems, lined, grey's
in beard and mustache—

(46-47)

The first couplet conveys a process of observation, and the

⁶⁴ The poems after "Cebu" tend to focus more on the relationship between the protagonist and his surroundings, as is evident in the Hong Kong poem (50-56), "Inn/Kyoto" (60-61), "For Benny" (62-63), "Later" (63-64), "Kids/Seoul" (68), the Seoul poem (71-72), "She's Back!" (78), "Eyes" (78-79), and "Here" (79).

enjambment of the first two couplets marks a shift in focus, to the sounds of the local construction and traffic that begin to penetrate his field of awareness. While observing his surroundings, Creeley catches a glimpse of his reflection in a mirror, a chance occurrence that draws his attention to his image. The self-reflexive sketch that follows suggests an attempt by the poet to insert himself into the scene as an integral part of a lively, energetic city.

It is from his adventures on the road that Creeley draws the strength necessary for self-redefinition. As the journey draws to a close, however, the poet indicates that the past remains an oppressive force in his life. Creeley concludes his poem, ironically, with a gesture of disclosure that replicates his mental state at the end of the tour. "EN ROUTE SAN FRANCISCO" is an open-ended sequence written, presumably, during Creeley's return trip. The piece reveals the tension in the mind of the poet, the sense of attachment that he continues to feel to Bobbie, despite the "months passed, / things happened in":

Say something
to me. "Could you
help me with
this..." Such

possibly the woman's
(Thailand) speech
in aisle adjacent,
plane's body, going

through night. It's

going home, with me—
months passed,
things happened in.

I need some
summary, gloss
of it all, days
later. Last recall

was Bobbie in
the kitchen saying
apropos coat, "If
you don't wear it

now, you never will..."
Or Bobbie, at airport.
re people—
"They all look

like R. Crumb
characters..." It
drifts, it
stays by itself.

(80-81)

Creeley initially attempts to focus on the experience of the moment: the people around him on the plane, the rhythm of the flight, the view through the passenger window. As the journey draws to a close, however, the life he left behind begins to impinge upon his consciousness. Creeley layers fragments of observation and domestic memory, simulating a transition in thought from the present to the past that parallels the literal return.

As the journey progresses, the poet becomes more intensely focused on his failed marriage. The fragment "Bobbie" tracks a memory of his wife that surfaces in his mind during the flight. The piece conveys Creeley's intense longing for her:

Her voice,
her voice, her
lovely voice...

(82)

As the poem proceeds, we are reminded of the determination that Creeley exhibited in "Soup," to remain within the experience of the present. As in that piece, the painful, domestic memory that arises now in the poet's mind compels him to turn to his surroundings for release:

Now's
the time.

Watching water
blast up
on window
Provincetown—

clouds, air, trees,
ground,
watching for
the next one.

(82)

The strategic placement of the first fragment immediately following "Bobbie" indicates a conscious effort on the part of the poet to refocus his mind on the present.⁶⁵ The fragment that follows embodies a process of observation, the movement of the lines corresponding to the accumulation of external detail in his mind.

⁶⁵ The phrase could also be a reference to the title of a Charlie Parker tune. Interpreted this way, one could argue that Creeley perhaps hears the piece on the plane. The placement of the song title at this point in the text could thus suggest that the music suddenly intrudes upon his thought, startling him out of his reverie.

Creeley's assertion in the final poem that "It feels things / are muddled again" (84) gestures to the open-endedness of his quest for self-redefinition and, therefore, of the record of the journey undertaken. Ostensibly the journal of a traveller, *Hello* concludes as the tour draws to a close. Yet, because the poet's self-renewal is incomplete at the end of the book, its conclusion is tenuous. The indeterminate ending of the volume renders it less an artifact, a finished piece of art, than a living record of an artistic consciousness that continues to evolve beyond the confines of the page. As Creeley himself suggests, at the end of his poem, we are only "Halfway to wherever" (73).

* * *

Although not immediately apparent, Philip Whalen's *Scenes of Life at the Capital* is similar to *Hello* in several respects. Like Creeley, Whalen is dedicated to tracking the mind in art, and he perceives form as originating in the poet's experience. In *Scenes of Life*, the poet interweaves disparate fragments or 'pieces,' creating a patchwork structure that figures his engagement of the world. Finally, as we shall see, Whalen's work is a road poem, a work that represents the poet's struggle to redefine the self by embracing a culture not his own.

CHAPTER 4

PHILIP WHALEN'S *SCENES OF LIFE AT THE CAPITAL*:"BIG ZEN SOUP"⁶⁶

In 1959, Philip Whalen characterized his art as "a picture or graph of a mind moving" (cited from Allen 420), a statement that has been much quoted or paraphrased by other postwar American poets—Allen Ginsberg, in particular—in defence of their own work.⁶⁷ As Whalen conceives of it, art is properly art when it serves as a vehicle for representing the mind in the very process of apprehending the world. This artistic view was formed in part from Whalen's early interest in Williams' work, an interest that developed during the elder poet's visit to Reed College in 1950. Williams helped Whalen "cut through all the fogs and megrims which [he] had contracted from reading 'The New Criticism' and *The Partisan Review*"; and the encouragement and support that the elder poet offered the students of his writer's workshop gave Whalen the confidence "to take

⁶⁶ The phrase is taken from *Scenes of Life (Heavy Breathing 67)*.

⁶⁷ See Ginsberg's *Indian Journals* (40-41), his *New York Quarterly* interview (18-19), and especially his interview "Improvised Poetics," in which the poet describes his technique as "diagramming" his thought (*Composed on the Tongue* 51). Ginsberg also echoes Whalen's dictum in a recent poem "Improvisation in Beijing": "I write poetry to make accurate picture my own mind" (*Cosmopolitan Greetings* xiii).

[himself] seriously as a writer" (cited from Allen and Tallman 454-55).⁶⁸ This early fondness for Williams later manifested itself in Whalen's poetry. In a 1972 interview, Whalen confesses that Williams' use of "colloquial American speech" inspired him to explore the possibility of creating a poetic language derived from his own idiom (Whalen, *Off the Wall* 63).⁶⁹ Even more importantly, Williams' "Relative Measure" provided the younger poet with a useful model for creating new poetic forms, forms "which correspond[ed] with exact feelings, with personal experience (*On Bear's Head* 191).

In Whalen's "The Same Old Jazz" (1957), for example, form originates in an act of perception, in the poet's responses to a world in flux outside his window:

So Sunday morning I'm in bed with Cleo
 She wants to sleep & I get up naked at the table
 Writing
 And it all snaps into focus
 The world inside my head & the cat outside the window
 A one-to-one relationship
 While I imagine whatever I imagine

Weed
 dry stalks of yarrow,
 repeated Y-branching V's, a multiplication

Of antelope, deer-horns? Umbels
 Hairy brown stars at the tip of brown wires

⁶⁸ Whalen's enthusiasm for the experience is reciprocated by Williams in his autobiography, in which he describes the students he met at Reed College as "good kids, all of them, doing solid work" (253).

⁶⁹ Whalen also cites the influence of Olson's "Projective Verse" in this interview (65).

A *menorah*, or more learnedly, "hand" written in Great
Seal Script

(14)

The piece is "a chronicle of the poet's mental and emotional experience, a chronicle of his relationship to time and space and the objects and people that occupy those dimensions" (Reid 40). Whalen explores the relationship between world and mind, the way that the external world, passing under the poet's watchful eye, shapes the internal world of the imagination. The poem proceeds by association, from the sensations, sights, and sounds that inundate the consciousness of the viewer, to the mental and emotional responses that unfold with increasing romantic extravagance as his imagination warms to the activity and occasion.

The technique of "The Same Old Jazz" is an attempt characteristic of Whalen to showcase the creative mind as active presence—even to the point of affirming a one-to-one relationship between perceiver and perceived. Typically for Whalen, the compositional process involves "hoist[ing] great blocks of language into place" on the page (*Highgrade* unp), and shaping those blocks into poems that trace "the movements of his ruminative, speculative imagination" (Davidson 118). *Scenes of Life at the Capital* (1971) is perhaps the poet's finest effort at graphing the action of the mind, for, like Creeley, Whalen finds the process poem a particularly suitable vehicle for rendering states of

consciousness in art.

Whalen travelled to Japan twice in the late sixties (1966-67, 1969-71), partly, at least, to teach part-time in Kyoto. Yet, aside from providing the poet with much-needed employment, these trips also helped reinforce certain attitudes he had developed toward America, and served to rekindle his interest in Zen Buddhism, to which he had first been introduced during his final year at Reed College (1951). Written during his second trip to Kyoto, *Scenes of Life* manifests a dialectical tension in the poet. Whalen frequently draws on memories of friends and family for moral support in foreign surroundings, to combat his loneliness. Further, the highly intertextual nature of the poem indicates that he is strongly tied to the culture he has inherited as an English-speaking American (Whalen quotes liberally from European and American texts). Yet, he is also bitterly critical of what he perceives as Western civilization's preoccupation with wealth and world domination. In its debunking of capitalism, democracy, and Christianity, *Scenes of Life* reveals the poet's conflicting feelings toward his country, which conflict is reflected in the poem's form.

While in Kyoto, Whalen attempts to immerse himself in Japanese culture. He is often kept from fully entering that space, however, by memories that intrude upon his consciousness as he travels the city. At one point near the

beginning of the poem, for example, the poet is seated in a local coffee house, casually observing his surroundings:

Here in the Shinshindo Coffee Shop again
 that blonde young lady who just disappeared into—
 and so swiftly reappeared out of—the *benjo* was not
 that funny girl who used to write for *Newsweek* but may
 as well have
 been—
 right this minute
 asleep in London, Sydney or Tashkent

(*Heavy Breathing* 54)

Whalen sees something of himself in the blonde-haired woman moving through the area—both stand outside the mainstream society of Kyoto. The sudden presence of the woman prompts an almost defensive reaction, perhaps even a latent need to assert his identity in a foreign context:

(streetcar fills the window 1-1/2 seconds) the hard
 chairs
 and benches here, big tables probably not like the
 ones
 in Reed College library. Fits of psychic imperialism
 I attach tags, carve initials, pee on fireplugs
 outlining my territory...

(55)

Whalen draws on his memories to shape his sense of the present; his past provides him with a personal reference point, familiar details that he superimposes on the immediate scene. The woman effectively triggers an act of "psychic imperialism" in the poet—an impulsive and aggressive act of self-preservation, which action he accomplishes by attaching familiar "tags" to what he sees.

Whalen then begins drifting between cultures, between

those of Japan and of his native Oregon. After observing three others in the vicinity—two in the coffee shop and "Bill Whosis drunk & yelling in front of Sanjo Station" (56)—the poet becomes caught up once more in an act of retrospection:

I can imagine living there as my grandmother did
gathering wild blackberries
driving out towards Gresham for a mess of green corn
time for melons, grapes & Chinook salmon
at The Dalles, dig mud clams at Netarts Bay
Family all over the place, friends from the old
Kilpatrick Hotel, bring blackberry jam
fresh string beans and salmon...

Whalen indicates, with this flood of memories, that he depends a great deal upon his past for his sense of stability during his stay in Japan.⁷⁰ Often, the poet is unable to conceive of a new way of life for himself because he cannot let go of the familiar (in this case his vivid memories of family outings and social gatherings): for Whalen, home is where the mind is.

On the whole, however, the poet is ambivalent in his attitude toward his country. Despite his struggle to maintain his identity in a foreign land, Whalen often expresses disillusionment with Western culture, and with his native America in particular. The poet begins a poignant appraisal by debunking Europe as a failed civilization dominated by "Industrialism" and the "Established Church" of Christianity (60), and then extends the scope of his polemic

⁷⁰ Whalen and his family lived in The Dalles, Oregon, until 1941.

to include America.

Whalen believes that his morals, and those of his friends and fellow artists, are radically different from those of Western civilization as a whole. "I can't stop thinking," he confesses at one point, "about those who really knew / What they were doing, Paul Gauguin, John Wieners, LeRoi Jones" (58). Immediately preceding these lines, Whalen indulges in another personal recollection, a tender memory of his friend Fred. The memory again draws the poet into a contemplation of his past—San Francisco, 1957. Yet, the juxtaposition of his thoughts on Gauguin, Wieners, and Jones with that memory marks a sudden shift in emotion and thought. His ruminations on these three artists attest to the more hostile attitude toward Western civilization that begins to play out in the text. What Gauguin, Wieners, and Jones share, in Whalen's view, is an aversion to the materialistic and imperialistic societies in which they were raised, and a sympathy for those oppressed by those societies.

Gauguin was, Robert Hughes observes, "the archetypal dropout, the man who gave up a banking career to paint" (127). Gauguin's interest in primitive art led him to Tahiti in the late 1800s, where he hoped to explore that interest among what he believed to be purely non-materialistic peoples (unlike the urban bourgeois of France, whom he detested). Sadly, however, he found instead "a

culture wrecked by missionaries, booze, exploitation, and gonorrhea" (129). John Wieners, a Black Mountain poet transplanted to San Francisco at the height of the poetry renaissance (1957), champions the urban downtrodden in his work. He is "the *poète maudit*, whose true place is among the wretched who inhabit the underworld of cities," the poor and despairing (Foye 575). LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka, whose theory I discuss at some length in my postscript) is a contemporary American black rights activist and writer, whose political agitation in the sixties targeted racism and the cultural aggression of white, middle-class America. After the assassination of Malcolm X (1965), Jones left his caucasian wife and friends in Greenwich Village and moved into Harlem, believing he was abandoning the white world. By introducing these talismanic figures into the flow of his memory, Whalen inadvertently registers his own desire to dissociate himself from the dominant (and, he believes, dominating) culture of his native country.⁷¹

⁷¹ Whalen also expresses this desire in his lecture of 23 July 1976 at the Naropa Institute, by lamenting the systematic displacement of aboriginal peoples by European nations:

On the other hand, there are all those other people out there. All those funny pagans and "lesser breeds without the Law," as Mr. Kipling said. They don't worship properly, they aren't Christians, they're different. We can't understand them when they talk....

So it is with us. We say, "Well, those horrible people over there are not Christians, and I can't understand them. They're eating each other. They don't wear clothes. We better

These feelings are reinforced by Whalen's growing interest in the Buddhist culture of Kyoto, which interest is conveyed in passages that chronicle his pilgrimages to various temples and shrines within the city and its environs. The poet's account of his walking tour southwest along the Kiyotaki River provides a salient example of the poet as pilgrim. In this section of the poem (*Heavy Breathing* 62-67), Whalen expresses a deep admiration of the Japanese culture of Kyoto, while occasionally brooding over what he perceives to be the ills of Western civilization:

Or Kozanji, for example, a little NW of the Capital
 Absolutely defenseless, abbot's house on pointed
 mountain
 Top, delicate walls
 Multitudes of people drifting through it
 Footless ghosts, no fingers, empty parkas
 The billows of smoke of burnt and burning leaves
 The silence, unbroken purity existing in the world
 Cuts down impatience

go civilize them. We'd better go and save them
 and get them all dipped properly, and made into
 good Christians. Everything will be a lot
 better when they can stop being primitive
 creatures, they can stop being savages, they
 can build automobiles and listen to TV, and do
 all the things that nice people do.... This
 attitude prevailed in Western society for a
 good many years, and still does to a certain
 extent.

(*"Sudden Histories"* 247)

The poet's rendering of Christian history is, of course, somewhat skewed, particularly in its contextualizing of early missionary work within contemporary industrial America. But it does make the point that the intrusion of the Christian-centred nations of Europe into aboriginal societies has, historically, all too often had deleterious effects on those societies.

Leaf jewels rage and brilliant silence
 Cold flames: Fudo-Myo-o
 Carved fire, sculptured flame world net wall
 Momentary bird-heads eyes beaks all swirl crimson ray
 Beams yellow streaked. He isn't in the fire he's made
 of it
 The light cool zap-energy sword the gentle hat of lotus
 flower
 Big square feet on solid rock Takao-yama

(62)

The layering of images helps to convey the poet's visual experience at Kozan-ji. The silence, the "unbroken purity" of the temple, draws Whalen into a contemplation of the natural surroundings—specifically, of "the leaf jewels." The colon in line ten signals a sudden shift in focus, to a close scrutiny of a sculpture or bas-relief of the spiritual guardian of Kozan-ji, Fudo-Myo-o. In Japanese art, Fudo-Myo-o is usually represented as a fierce being surrounded by flames that symbolize his destruction of evil. An image of retribution, the sculpture prompts an act of self-negation in the poet, a vision of the destruction of the "Culture of dim Oregon farmhouse" (63)—in effect, of the values of Western civilization instilled in him as a child.¹²

This vision incidentally triggers another reflection on the social ills of America, represented in a layering of thoughts on Protestantism, Capitalism, and Democracy (64-65). Whalen conceives of these three institutions as working together for one goal only, the increase of material

¹² In his interview with Lee Bartlett, Whalen notes that he was raised a Christian Scientist (Whalen, *Off the Wall* 70).

wealth:

In America we've been fighting each other 100 years
 We pretend we're unimaginably rich
 But we are poor and afraid of the poor who must become
 The Army to defend us against right and wrong
 All automatic and impersonal
 The Law is The Government
 Shall take all your money and kill you
 Being completely free and entirely, impartially just...

The real shame of America is the lack of an
 anticlerical
 Movement or party. All parties try to compound
 With invisible State Protestant Church that
 theoretically
 Doesn't exist. Rubes who think of themselves as
 Members in good standing are bilked and robbed.

(64)

Whalen's vision is of an America that exploits its poor by sacrificing them in times of war to preserve the opulence of the rich and powerful. Further, the Protestant Church, the poet suggests, grants the state divine license to rob and murder loyal Americans. This vision represents a gradual intensification of Whalen's bitterness toward Capitalism and Democracy, which bitterness is most strongly expressed in this satirical attack:

Fifty years of fighting the Bolsheviki
 To maintain a 500% profit on every waffle-iron and
 locomotive
 At 499% times are growing difficult, we must try to
 retrench
 At 497 1/2% lay off some of the newer employees the
 market looks
 "Bearish" at 496% SELL OUT while there's still a
 chance.
 In order to boost profits back to 498%
 A "presence" appears in Cambodia

(66)

Whalen conceives an interrelationship between military,

political, and economic institutions in the United States by implicating the American capitalist enterprise in the country's anti-communist war machine; in his view, American business fuels the Vietnam conflict (and even controls its escalation), not for the sake of defending the South Vietnamese, but for the sake of maintaining obscene profit margins.¹³

The deeper Whalen immerses himself in traditional Japanese culture, the harder he struggles to dissociate himself from America. The poet's reaction to a freeway he encounters on his journey reflects this struggle:

The empty freeway bored and frightened me
Broken highway to a pretty place where I bought
expensive noodles
Well, it opened up a space, I could see the distance,
for a change
Breathe. Did I miss nine trillion cars, want them to
be
On this road with me?

(67)

Whalen emerges from the seclusion of the Buddhist temples into a setting reminiscent of a contemporary American urban landscape: the scenic highway that runs along the Kiyotaki River. The freeway is empty, and the poet wonders momentarily if he actually misses the heavy traffic of San Francisco. Significantly, however, he rejects the freeway and continues on his pilgrimage, embracing a new life, and a

¹³ See also Whalen's inflammatory remarks on the tragedy at Kent State University on 4 May 1970 (76-79).

new mode of thinking—the Zen way.¹⁴

Unlike other religions or philosophies, or even other sects of Buddhism, Zen advances no formal doctrine, scripture, or ideology for guiding the faithful to salvation or enlightenment. As Sohaku Ogata notes, "there is no system of thought in Zen" (33). Nevertheless, practitioners of this thought—properly speaking, an ontology—concur on certain aspects.¹⁵ The goal of the Zenist is to achieve illumination or insight into the nature—the essence—of one's being. One may achieve this insight through intuition, and not by the workings of the intellect, for it is the awakening intuition that reveals "the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistically-trained mind" (Humphreys 42).

Zen values direct experience over the intellectual reduction of experience to abstract systems of thought. For the intellect, language is a key tool for understanding the world. On the most fundamental level, the rational mind relies on signs (words) to categorize the objects of perception. On a more complex level, great intellects organize these signs into systems of thought and discourse—

¹⁴ In his interview with Yves LePellec, Whalen observes that the two trips to Kyoto "were essential as far as [his] knowledge of Zen [was] concerned" (Whalen, *Off the Wall* 59).

¹⁵ In fact, many writers on Zen conceive of it not as an ontology, but, more appropriately they believe, as 'a way of living' or 'a state of consciousness.'

philosophy, religion, politics, economics, science—and apply them to experience in an effort to clarify or explain existence and its conditions: "we tend to regard ideas and words as facts in themselves, and this way of thinking has entered deeply into the constitution of our consciousness. We now imagine that when we have ideas and words we have all that can be said of our experience of Reality" (Suzuki, *Studies* 48-49).

And yet, the Zenist would argue, with book-knowledge come certain crucial limitations in our understanding of ourselves. The follower of Zen believes that words do not provide insight into the nature of existence, for they are merely symbols of reality.¹⁶ The mind that conceives of words as truths becomes imprisoned in a web of abstractions. The Zenist "shuns abstractions, representations and figures of speech" (Humphreys 14), preferring instead to "plunge right into the working of things as they move on before and behind our senses" (Suzuki, *Studies* 81).¹⁷

¹⁶ This tale, told by Alan Watts, clearly expresses the Zen attitude toward words: "Professor Irving Lee, of Northwestern University, used to hold up a matchbox before his class, asking 'What's this?' The students would usually drop squarely into the trap and say, 'A matchbox!' At this Professor Lee would say, 'No, no! It's *this*--' throwing the matchbox at the class, and adding, 'Matchbox is a noise. Is *this* a noise?'" (*Way of Zen* 130).

¹⁷ Whalen had a feel for this basic Zen belief well before his first trip to Japan. In a notebook entry, dated 23 September 1961, the poet insists that "Abstraction is our usual state of mind" (*Highgrade* unp).

It goes without saying, then, that Zen shuns all dualistic thought, particularly as that thought originates in the tendency of the ego to differentiate between self and other. The ego provides one with a personal reference point, a sense of self derived from the body of one's past experiences and memories. Through the workings of the ego, one arrives at a sense of identity, of oneself as a unique individual, standing in contradistinction to all other selves. In Japan, through "tradition and training the ego is kept at its smallest and weakest"; Zen does not deny "the discernible separateness of self and other ... distinctions necessary for ongoing human discourse and understanding" (Humphreys 135). Yet, it attempts to limit the ego's tendency to discriminate, to free the mind to perceive the interdependency of all things, a higher order arising out of difference. "The emphasis [in Zen] is on a vantage point where the separations and identifications remain, but also where the differentiations are gathered up in the totality of the *dharma*, or supreme reality" (Euseden 50).¹⁸

In Western civilization, our cultural inheritance has also conditioned us to conceive of life dualistically: "What we call the Western tradition is formed by two major influences, Hebraic and Greek, and both these influences are

¹⁸ Zen differs somewhat from Pantheism, in that the Pantheist views all things in the universe as united in God. In the Zen view, there is no God in which all things are united.

profoundly dualistic in spirit" (Barrett ix). The religion that has dominated the Western world for nearly two thousand years is also rooted deeply in dualistic thinking. In the Christian faith, God is the absolute authority, the supreme being in which all things originate. The Bible preaches that God, in His infinite good, is eternal; humanity, His fallible creation, exists corporeally in a condition consequent to the Original Sin. Anthropocentric in derivation, Christian doctrine also preaches that God, in His divine wisdom, gave us dominion over all other creatures and forms of life on earth.

The Christian mind has thus been conditioned to conceive of existence in terms of dualities: deity versus a fallen creation, good versus evil, humanity against nature. In Zen belief, those so conditioned struggle unnaturally to maintain the hierarchies and oppositions fundamental to their understanding of the world through measures of control and empowerment. Zen theorists have postulated, for example, that the Christian conceives of nature as a servant to his/her temporal needs: "for Man ... Nature is to be conquered and made use of for his own material welfare and comfort"; "Man strives to make Nature amenable to his idea of rationality" (Suzuki, *Studies* 176, 177).¹⁹

From the Zen perspective, Christian doctrine is absurd;

¹⁹ See also Abe (212).

it is an abstract system fabricated by the Western world out of a need for self-definition, rational order, and stability in what would otherwise be an incomprehensible universe.

"Zen," as Suzuki argues, "is free from all these dogmatic and 'religious' encumbrances" (Humphreys 30). In Zen, there is no God or absolute power to which humanity is accountable, and upon which it is dependent for its existence and, therefore, for a concrete sense of self.⁸⁰

The follower of Zen eschews the cosmological view built upon power struggles that pits deity against humanity, and humanity against nature. In Zen, it is not "Man facing Nature as an unfriendly stranger but Man thoroughly merged in Nature, coming out of Nature and going into Nature" (Suzuki, *Studies* 192); all things are conceived of as "interfused aspects of a whole" (Humphreys 45). For the Zenist, then, one's essential nature is not to be found in a body or its sensations, in one's feelings or memories, in words, abstract theories or doctrines: "the basic reality of [one's] life is not any conceivable object. Ultimately it is not even to be identified with any idea" (Watts, *Way of Zen* 48). It cannot be conceptualized by the workings of the intellect or ego, or systematized by religion, philosophy, or science.

⁸⁰ As Singh and Sirisena observe, the Zenist is not "the slave of scriptural teachings," but follows his/her experiences, "the reality ... which is beyond the reach of dialectical reasoning and thought" (viii).

Whalen was drawn to this central Zen belief when he first read the essays of D.T. Suzuki (1951), and the poet's two trips to Kyoto helped enhance his basic understanding of Zen. Yet, while that understanding is expressed in *Scenes of Life* (in Whalen's attitudes toward the dominant systems of thought in the Western world), one cannot properly call the piece a "Zen poem." *Scenes of Life* is too didactic, for one thing. Alan Watts characterizes Zen poetry as verbally economic and precise. The effectiveness of such poetry, he argues, lies in its direct, objective presentation of concrete things; it is not "philosophy or commentary about life" (*Way of Zen* 177). Further, Watts notes, the poetry of the Beat Generation "is always a shade too self-conscious, too subjective, and too strident" for Zen, which would "rather hand you *the thing itself* without comment" ("Beat Zen" 611).

Even though Whalen has dissociated himself from the Beats (Whalen, *Off the Wall* 62), one could certainly argue that this critique of "Beat Zen" can be applied to his poetry. *The Kindness of Strangers* (1976), for example, seems almost burdened with obscure and arcane references. "The connections attempted in these poems," so an anonymous reviewer laments, "often do not work unless the reader has access to the mind that originated them" ("*The Kindness of Strangers*" 1140). In another review of this volume, Edward Butscher scorns what he calls Whalen's "nemesis,"

the puerile belief that whatever he puts on paper assumes significance, bird-droppings raised to the curb heights of avant-garde sculpture.... Like so many of his fellow free spirits', Whalen's verses are readily identifiable by their persistent diatribes against national materialism and other of society's hideous crimes, which presumably grants automatic relevance to automatic droppings, and their more persistent, incestuous cross-references and dedications to comrades-in-arms....

(171)

While Butscher's review is itself something of a persistent diatribe, the substance of his argument is worthy of some consideration. Critics who take Whalen's work to task do so primarily on the grounds that it is far too self-indulgent, too coarsely didactic. One could certainly censure *Scenes of Life* on these very same grounds.

However, in spite of its verbosity, its intense self-indulgence, and its strident and polemical nature—in short, in spite of all the things that make *Scenes of Life* unZenlike—the poem nevertheless exhibits certain traits characteristic of Zen poetry.⁸¹ Zen, as Alan Watts points

⁸¹ Whalen was born and bred into Western society; he was educated in American schools, raised by American parents; and he served in the U.S. Army Air Corps during the second World War. One could argue that it would be extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, for the poet so raised to write a truly "Zen" poem.

out, has "a calligraphic style of painting ... usually a painting and poem in one" (*Way of Zen* 172). *Scenes of Life* is such a multimedia work, a combination of doodles, calligraphy, and verse.⁸² In addition, Zen art stresses intuition and process over calculation, craft and product: "the point ... of these arts is the doing of them rather than the accomplishments" (Watts, *Way of Zen* 190).⁸³ Like Zen artists, Whalen privileges the process of composition as the most appropriate subject matter for art. For Whalen, art is "NOT A DECISION OR A CHOICE," but a "DISCOVERY" (*On Bear's Head* 68):

There is a wonderful kind of writing
Which is never written NOW
About this moment. It's always done later
And redone until it is perfect.

(*Heavy Breathing* 60)

In this stanza, the poet expresses the sentiments of many of his contemporaries, as well as of Zen artists: writing done

⁸² See especially pages 88-89. In his interview with Aram Saroyan, Whalen recalls studying calligraphy at Reed College—a course that has been invaluable to him throughout his career (Whalen, *Off the Wall* 42). The poet has experimented with combinations of distinctive calligraphy and pictorial elements in much of his work, but especially in his intriguing volume, *Highgrade: Doodles, poems* (1966), the Philip Whalen issue of *Intransit* (1967), and his poems "Hope for the Best," "1:ii:59 a very complicated way of saying 'appearances deceive'?", and "The Grand Design" (*On Bear's Head* 275, 291, 379-383).

⁸³ In the finest art of Japan, Suzuki observes, there is no shape imposed on the work, "no artificial or intellectually calculated scheme for any kind of effect" (*Zen and Japanese Culture* 225).

"NOW" emphatically signs the moment of composition, uncompromised by borrowed craft and predetermined form. The poem that is "written NOW" values the intuitive responses of its creator, whereas the poem that is "done later / And redone" privileges the artifact, the abstraction of the original experience.

Finally, *Scenes of Life* also expresses moments of temporary enlightenment in the author, an important characteristic of Zen poetry, and of the haiku in particular:

Hedges glisten tile roof tin roof telephone pole
 Decoratively tormented black pine
 Slowly repeating its careful program
 Endlessly regretting but here is original done once
 Not to be reproduced nor electronically remembered

Loosen up. Festoon.

An enormous drop of pure water suddenly there
 Right in the center of preceding page

Nothing can be done about that. The line was ruined.
 OK.

(47)⁸⁴

The immediate context of this passage locates the poet at a moment/place of reorientation within his surroundings in Kyoto—he has just settled into his accommodations and is "carefully seated / On the floor," observing "Another messed-up weedy garden." While Whalen is delighted to be in

⁸⁴ Suzuki, in his *Zen and Japanese Culture*, provides a detailed discussion of the haiku as "the expression of a temporary enlightenment" in the poet (228).

Kyoto, he is also somewhat overwhelmed by his new surroundings, and acutely aware that he is approximately five thousand miles away from his birthplace, "Far away across that ocean which looked / Through Newport windows years ago." Homesick for America, Whalen identifies with an "idea of himself"; he derives a "specious and precarious sense of permanence" and distinctness by grounding himself in a fixed self-image (Watts, *Way of Zen* 122).

The poet receives an illumination at this point through a spontaneous act that momentarily eradicates his idea of himself. This sudden flash is registered in the text as a shift in focus, from the surrounding landscape to the drop of water that falls on the page of the notebook in which he is writing. The drop of water blots the text, nullifying the poet's attempt to concretize himself in words in the very middle of the compositional process. With the barriers to enlightenment momentarily washed away, Whalen is free to experience what Suzuki calls the "wholeness of things" (*Studies* 81), the "original inseparability" of self and other (*Zen and Japanese Culture* 359). The poet accepts the accident, but the moment is fleeting. Shortly following this incident, Whalen begins pondering his past again, his term of service in the U.S. Air Corps.

The drop of water momentarily fulfills the role of the Zen master, demonstrating to Whalen the futility of relying on words to achieve enlightenment. His encounter with a

wasp shortly following this incident reinforces this lesson:

Wasp in the bookshelf rejects Walt Whitman,
 Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, The Goliard Poets,
 A Vedic Reader, Lama Govinda, Medieval French Verses &
 Romances,
 Long Discourses of the Buddha, and the Principal
 Upanishads.
 Window glass reads more entertainingly
 But soon that too is left for the foxtail grass
 Camellia hedge, the dull mid-morning sun

followed by accidental descent into goofball drift
 unintentionally
 but such is the cost of knowledge

(*Heavy Breathing* 48)

The conceptual flow of the passage simulates the flight of the wasp through the poet's room. The path that the insect takes provides the poet with a vital lesson, with enlightenment on "the cost of knowledge." In Zen terms, by flying into Whalen's home, the wasp has separated itself from its elemental nature. Further, the insect seems momentarily lost among the poet's books, purveyors of abstract theories and philosophies. Not recognizing any value in these constructs of the rational mind, it moves intuitively to the window, which "reads more entertainingly" because the transparent surface affords the wasp a view of the outdoors, where it functions as an integral part of the natural world.

The final gravitation of the wasp from the window to the garden is an example of Zen naturalness—of the mind's acting according to its original nature. "As 'the fish swims in the water but is unmindful of the water, the bird

flies in the wind but knows not of the wind,' so the true life of Zen has no need to 'raise waves when no wind is blowing,' to drag in religion or spirituality as something over and above life itself" (Watts, *Way of Zen* 149).

Whalen, perhaps taking a lesson from the wasp, seeks to put aside the clutter of his mind, the theories and philosophies that supplant his innate sense of being with abstractions of self and existence:

I sit in the north room
 Look out across the floor into the garden
 12 1/2 tatami mats the pleasure of contemplating them
 They are beautiful and they aren't mine.
 Present appearance of quiet neutral emptiness
 Books, music, pictures, letters, jewels, machines
 Buddha statues and other junk all hidden away...

(*Heavy Breathing* 73)

Here, the poet has stayed the pursuits of the intellect, and has hidden his possessions away, material things by which he, at least in part, defines himself. Whalen then begins to meditate, an activity that helps one "see the world as it is concretely, undivided by categories and abstractions," because one is looking at the world "with a mind which is not thinking—which is to say, forming symbols" (Watts, *Way of Zen* 152). In each of these cases, the text presents an unfolding contemplation, a process of visual observation that leads to a Zenlike moment of illumination.

The poet is slow to learn from these experiences, however. Later in the text, we find him trapped "behind the Great Book Mountain / Feeling like Lemuel Gulliver" (*Heavy*

Breathing 88). The simile alludes, of course, to *Gulliver's Travels*, Part Two, in which we find the protagonist in the mythological kingdom of Brobdingnag, reading a treatise on history and morality by an author of the kingdom. The treatise discourses upon the weakness of humankind, "shewing how diminutive, contemptible, and helpless an Animal was Man in his own Nature; how unable to defend himself from the Inclemencies of the Air, or the fury of wild Beasts." Gulliver is impressed by the "masculine" style of the prose, unadorned by "Florid" expressions or "unnecessary Words" (Swift 112). Yet, in spite of the austere style of the text, the protagonist is nevertheless overwhelmed by its words—minified by the sheer physical size of the book.

Whalen's simile reflects a Zenlike attitude toward words and texts. Like Gulliver, the poet feels dwarfed by the books that surround him, conceives of himself as a mind made miniscule and insignificant by "the Great Book Mountain." The insertion of the word "DISTRACTION" at the end of this confession (centred in the text) registers a sudden shift in focus, from his books to his surroundings. Direct observation briefly replaces reading; things replace words. The poet's eye drifts over an "assemblage of eggs green onions butter and // amethyst crystals on top of the kitchen cabinet" (*Heavy Breathing* 88), a world of immediate sensation that momentarily pulls him out of "the WORD OCEAN." The visual act prompts a critical self-assessment,

an acknowledgment that his ongoing research has resulted in the inadvertent ruination of his food, "A whole set, (90 yen worth) of red beans." The fact that the books Whalen has been reading are dictionaries is significant. A dictionary provides its reader with the etymology and definition of a word, and often offers examples of its usage or other words (synonyms). By surrounding himself with a "mountain" of dictionaries, Whalen has thus not only erected a barrier of books around him, shutting himself off from his immediate surroundings, but has also, in Zen terms, immersed himself deep in abstractions. In brief, the dictionaries have mired him in abstractions of abstractions.

A sudden and spontaneous accident similar to the blotting of his notebook page releases the poet from his entrapment, however:

And so knocked over my drink
I now have a pantsfull of cold sweet coffee
Hop up out of the way and white shirt all stained....

I am suddenly spastic brainless
Flailing arms and feet
Complete total mess. Rush home.

(89)

Whalen is involved in the study of Hopkins' poetry and, reaching for his notebook to record the "message" of a poem, knocks a cup of coffee onto his lap. Like the wasp lost in his room, the poet is so deeply engrossed in a world of abstractions that he has lost perspective on his immediate surroundings, a condition directly responsible for the

accident that finally pulls him out of the "WORD OCEAN."⁸⁵

Whalen manifests his emancipation as an abandonment of his intellectual pursuits:

...And now 10:30 A.M. washed and broken away
 From books and music I sit with my feet melting
 In bright invisible mountain water that lies above
 Brown chocolate mud and fir needles and little sticks
 Two inches or twenty feet below—impossible to judge
 Because of stillness and clarity of water
 Smooth and heavy as cloth of cold
 Black transparent stream....

(90)

The movement of the line simulates a process of engagement; the poet has left behind the world of words and plunged "right into the working of things" (Suzuki, *Studies* 81), freeing himself to experience "the essence of everything ... which is the sole reality of consciousness (Singh, Sirisena x).⁸⁶

Scenes of Life at the Capital showcases Whalen's

⁸⁵ There is a parallel in Zen training for the accident that befalls Whalen in this passage. Zen is a discipline, Watts observes, "enforced with the big stick" (*Way of Zen* 108). In an effort to cleanse the pupil's mind of "the fetters of thought" (Humphreys 94), the Zen master will often resort to what is known as "centre-returning," a sudden, violent attack on the pupil that supposedly helps to focus him/her on the "this" and the "now" (95). Suzuki recounts the approach of one particularly brutal Zen master, notorious for the liberal application of the stick: "Tokusan used to say: 'When you say Yes, you get thirty blows of my stick; when you say No, you get thirty blows of my stick just the same'" (*Studies* 184).

⁸⁶ See also Whalen's poem "The Education Continues Along," in which the poet wonders "How badly [he needs] to read one more book," since "one more book has as many lies in it as all the rest." The poet thinks that, instead of reading, he should "go look at the world" (*On Bear's Head* 325).

developing fascination with Japanese culture and Zen. At the end of the poem, the allure of the East is unhesitatingly expressed, as the poet presents himself as an active participant in several of Kyoto's spring festivals:

Sun and secret perfume breeze
 All greens vibrating
 The dogs in the corral roaring and running
 We circle them, our horses raving foam
 Splash my lavender *hakama*
 Green hunting-robe over yellow kimono...

I haul on the reins the horse dances to the left
 Blood mixed with his foam as I fire arrows among
 screaming
 Dogs.

(*Heavy Breathing* 102)

Although it is not explicitly stated, the passage indicates participation in the *Setsubun*, or "Change of Season" ceremony, held 2-4 February at Yoshida Shrine, Imamiya Shrine, or Rozan-ji Temple. The *Setsubun* is a ritual that simultaneously welcomes spring and banishes winter. The participants "chase demons away by shooting arrows, throwing beans, and by shouting the words: 'In with good fortune, out with the devils!'" (Keene and Plutschow 65). Whalen's participation in the ritual instills in him a sense of kinship with the other riders, and the firing of arrows is for him an acknowledgment of a new birth, not merely in nature, but in himself as well.

When he returned to the United States in June, 1971, Whalen began "an American version of formal Zen training" (Whalen, *Off the Wall* 68) at the Zen Centre in San

Francisco, which training ultimately and radically changed his life. In 1972, the poet was ordained *Unsui* (Zen monk), and in 1975, he became *Shuso* (head monk) at the Zen Mountain Center in Tassajara Springs (California). *Scenes of Life at the Capital* thus captures a crucial time in the poet's life, a rite of passage, a turning to the East.

* * *

Like Whalen, Jack Kerouac also developed an interest in Buddhism in the fifties, an interest that, several scholars have observed, often came into conflict with his Roman Catholic beliefs.⁸⁷ Kerouac read Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible* in 1954, and was struck by the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Surangama Sutra*, the *Lankavatara Scripture*, and the *Tao-Teh-King*. The author was fascinated with the notion central to these key Buddhist texts, that all afflictions are simply concatenations of one's mind. Kerouac first began to explore this basic premise in his writing in *San Francisco Blues*, which he began shortly after he read Goddard's anthology. Yet, Buddhism did not become a central theme in his writing until 1955 or 1956, in works like *Mexico City Blues* (1955), *Desolation Angels* (1956, 1961), and *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* (1956). In 1954, Kerouac's primary creative influence was not religious, but musical.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Nicosia (459, 490) and Jones (11).

CHAPTER 5

"COMPOSING WILD, UNDISCIPLINED, PURE": IMPROVISATION
AND KEROUAC'S *SAN FRANCISCO BLUES*⁸⁸

Jack Kerouac has described himself on more than one occasion as "a jazz poet" (*Heaven* 40), an image that he cultivated during the writing of *San Francisco Blues* (April, 1954) and began to promote shortly after completing that volume.⁸⁹ In a letter to Alfred Kazin of 27 October 1954, for example, Kerouac proclaims that he has "invented a new prose, Modern Prose, jazzlike breathlessly swift spontaneous and unrevised floods...it comes out wild, at least it comes out pure..." (*Selected Letters* 449). And, in a letter to Sterling Lord of 19 August 1955, Kerouac prophesies that the recently-completed *Mexico City Blues* will change poetry "into a medium for *Lingual Spontaneity*...a kind of challenge Jazz Session for letters" (510). As these letters clearly show, this new, improvisatory style of writing became a passion of Kerouac's in the fifties; and he approached the composition of all his works after *On The Road* (1957) with a Pound-like belief in an exact parallel between jazz/bop technique and his own method: "Yes, jazz and bop, in the

⁸⁸ The quoted phrase is taken from Kerouac's "Belief & Technique For Modern Prose" (*Good Blonde* 73).

⁸⁹ In *Mexico City Blues*, Kerouac calls himself "a jazz poet blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam session on Sunday" (np).

sense of a, say, a tenor man drawing a breath and blowing a phrase on his saxophone, till he runs out of breath, and when he does, his sentence, his statement's been made... that's how I therefore separate my sentences, as breath separations of the mind" (cited from Berrigan 83).

That Kerouac should attempt to characterize his art as jazz performance is not surprising, given the deep impression which that music made on him between the thirties and fifties. During his time at Horace Mann Prep School (1939-40), Kerouac frequented the nightclubs of New York, enriching his knowledge of the music and honing his critical acumen. In addition, he occasionally wrote columns for *The Horace Mann Record* during the two years of his enrolment. In December, 1939, in the Greenwich Village nightclub Nick's, music critic George Avakian provided Kerouac and his friends with an enlightening discourse on jazz, highlighting the discussion with analyses of the techniques of specific musicians.⁹⁰ During the interview, Avakian also differentiated between two types of jazz: Swing and Chicago style. In the critic's view, "real jazz" (as the Chicago style was often called in the thirties) "is nothing but the impromptu instincts of several instrumentalists, who combine together and play as their souls see fit." Swing, as

⁹⁰ The interview was published in the *Record*, 8 December 1939. Kerouac published six articles in all for this newspaper, five of which focus on jazz.

Avakian understands it, is primarily a music of written arrangements, "shaped out to fit the lines of a large combination of instruments" (Kerouac, "Swing Authority" 3). One style of jazz involves "high-level teamwork" (Stearns 199), while the other stresses the expressive capabilities of the individual player, offering as it does greater opportunities for improvisation (Kerouac, "Swing Authority" 3).

Five months after the interview with Avakian, Kerouac reviewed the collection of Chicago style jazz records that the critic had produced in the interim.⁹¹ In this piece, Kerouac draws on his interview with George Avakian to make his own distinctions between Swing and Chicago style jazz: Chicago style jazz, Kerouac avers, "is the outburst of passionate musicians, who pour all their energy into their instruments in the quest for soulful expression and super-improvisation," whereas Swing is a more formal, stylized music, "a sensationalized carbon-copy of [Chicago style] jazz," lacking its "purity and sincerity" ("Real Solid Drop-Beat Riffs" 4).

It is not necessary here to assess the depth of Kerouac's knowledge of jazz in the thirties, or how capable he was then of distinguishing between the popular musical styles of the day. One must bear in mind, after all, that

⁹¹ "Real Solid Drop-Beat Riffs and Kicks are Plentiful In George Avakian's Unique Album of Chicago Style Jazz," co-authored by the critic's younger brother, Albert.

these articles were not authored by a professional, seasoned critic, but by a teenager captivated by the music. What is noteworthy, however, is that his early exposure to jazz seems to have imparted to Kerouac a strong grasp of its basic musical structure: theme and variation. These early pieces also show that he developed an ability to recognize "the way a soloist improvises around the melody of a song" at a time when a new and highly improvisational style of jazz was beginning to emerge in Harlem: Bop (4).⁹²

Bop, in a sense, was a revolt against Big Band ensembles, which most often performed within the restrictions of written arrangements—a necessary measure of control because of the large number of instrumentalists involved, and because Swing was, as its name implies, a music for dance.⁹³ While improvisation was certainly not foreign to Swing, the opportunities to improvise and experiment that it afforded were relatively restricted; solos were generally "short [and] stylized," often simple

⁹² It is generally accepted that Minton's Playhouse saw the first stirrings of Bop. The club opened late in 1940, with a house band consisting of Thelonious Monk, Kenny Clarke, Nick Fenton, and Joe Guy—although the club's open-bandstand policy afforded a place to many of what became Bop's most eminent musicians: Charlie Christian, Tad Dameron, Bud Powell, Charlie Parker, and Dizzy Gillespie, for example, played at Minton's in the forties.

⁹³ Unless one is writing a volume on the subject, it is difficult to compare Swing and Bop without oversimplifying. In consideration of space, I will limit my focus to the role of improvisation in the two styles, as it most directly concerns my study of Kerouac.

paraphrases of a melodic line that "minimized the opportunities for exploratory expression" (Tanner and Gerow 81). Bop innovators, on the other hand, typically rejected the written arrangement, preferring instead a more spontaneous approach to making music: an expression of a theme in unison, followed by several solos. Often, a group even "disregarded the initial statement of the melody and began their improvisation at the beginning of the selection" (83).⁹⁴ The preferred method of improvisation in the Bop era involved the creation of "entirely new melodic lines over the given harmonies" (the chordal structure) of the song, rather than a simple paraphrasing of the theme (Berendt 149). Bop thus stressed "the individuality of the jazz musician as a creative artist" (Russell 202), the ability of the soloist to transform what André Hodeir would call "musically threadbare" themes into new and boldly personal expressions (101).

Kerouac remained in New York for a year after graduating from Horace Mann (1940), during which he attended Columbia University on a football scholarship. It was at that time that a friend from Horace Mann, Seymour Wyse, introduced him to Minton's and other local Bop havens, such as Clark Monroe's Uptown House and the Three Deuces. In 1943, after serving briefly in the Merchant Marine, Kerouac

⁹⁴ Marshall Stearns offers a similar perspective, claiming that "bop made a practice of featuring variations upon melodies that were never stated" (229).

returned to New York and lived in an apartment near Columbia University with his first wife, Edie Parker. The young couple frequented the local clubs, with Wyse often accompanying them. These timely escapades offered Kerouac the opportunity "to evaluate [Bop] as it was developed" (Burns 36). With Wyse's help, and through repeated exposure to many different playing styles, Kerouac gradually overcame an initial aversion to the music and developed his own "bop ear" (Nicosia, *Memory Babe* 125).⁹⁵ When he began formulating a new method of "poetic" composition in the early fifties, his interest in jazz dovetailed with his concerns as a postwar American writer for representing "the actual workings of [his] mind during the writing" (cited from Berrigan 65).⁹⁶ "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (1953) is Kerouac's definitive statement on writing, a document that outlines the author's method of representing himself in art "by the more personal forms that told the

⁹⁵ See Seymour Wyse's account of this period in his interview with Dave Moore. Jim Burns, in his article "Kerouac and Jazz," and Allen Ginsberg, in his interview with Yves LePellec (*Composed on the Tongue* 63-93), have both recounted Kerouac's nightclub activity in the early forties. Burns' study is primarily historical in focus, offering a detailed explication of the many references to jazz musicians in Kerouac's texts. Ginsberg stresses the importance of those early experiences to the development of Kerouac's improvisational style of writing. See also my article "Improvisatory Structures in Kerouac's 'October in the Railroad Earth' and *The Subterraneans*."

⁹⁶ Kerouac has described his art in more colourful terms, as writing that "imitates as best it can the flow of the mind as it moves in its spacetime continuum" (*Good Blonde* 190).

truth about his experiences, regardless of inherited literary conventions" (Weinreich 4).

In his article "The Logic of Spontaneity," George Dardess more or less ignores the jazz metaphors that Kerouac uses in "Essentials," focusing instead on the connections that the author draws between his compositional method and more "natural forces": Kerouac's subject matter "initiate[s] a movement which necessarily bears the writer farther and farther away from that 'subject,'" toward "peripheral release and exhaustion." This movement is rendered in a work like *Visions of Cody* as an accumulation of impressions, an "outfanning" pattern that builds progressively toward a climax of sensation and release of energy (734). Dardess' approach is intriguing and effectively demonstrates how the Spontaneous Prose method enabled Kerouac to record rhythms of thought and perception in their original energy. Yet, I am somewhat surprised that Dardess fails to place due emphasis on the role that jazz played in the development of Kerouac's method, given how important the music was to the young writer, and given the prevalence of jazz terminology in his "Essentials."

For example, Kerouac likens his technique to jazz improvisation in the second tenet of his manifesto: "PROCEDURE. Time being of the essence in the purity of speech, sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret-idea words, *blowing* (as per jazz

musician) on subject of image" (Kerouac, *Good Blonde* 69). The origins of the author's "sketching" technique are well-documented. On 25 October 1951, Ed White, a friend of Kerouac's enrolled in Columbia University's Architecture program, suggested that he try sketching "like a painter but with words" (*Selected Letters* 356). White's offhand suggestion led Kerouac to see the writing process in a new way, as a means of documenting his mind in its action. "Rather than viewing writing as the translation of already perceived experience into language and structure," as Tim Hunt observes, "sketching views writing as the process of recording the artist's act of perception or interpretation of ... experience" (124).⁹⁷

Kerouac's sketching technique has definite affinities with jazz improvisation. Joachim Berendt defines improvisation in jazz as "the personal expression of the

⁹⁷ Bernard Duffey, in his "The Three Worlds of Jack Kerouac," argues that Kerouac "founds his style upon the substance of experience" (181). For detailed accounts of the origins of Kerouac's sketching technique, see Nicosia's *Memory Babe* (356-57) and Ed White's recollections (as quoted in Gifford and Lee 159-60). Critics have also noted the influence of Neal Cassady's notorious "Joan Anderson Letter" on the development of Kerouac's Spontaneous Prose method. Again, Nicosia provides a comprehensive account (*Memory Babe* 336-38), as does Kerouac himself in his *Paris Review* interview (Berrigan 65-66). Nelson Eddy attempts to show Cassady's influence by citing similarities in the rhetoric of Neal's letters to Kerouac and excerpts of "Essentials." While some of the connections that Eddy makes seem somewhat tenuous, he does suggest some illuminating possibilities, two of which are parallels between the first and fourth tenets of Kerouac's manifesto and portions of Cassady's letters of July, 1949 and 13 March 1947, respectively.

improviser and of his musical, spiritual, and emotional situation" (150). The 'shape' of the improvisation is governed by the emotional state of the soloist during performance, as well as by his/her intellectual responses to the theme. Thus, in the solo, "the self of the musician is clearly reflected" (143). Like the instrumentalist, Kerouac first establishes a theme or conceptual focus, what he calls in the first tenet of his manifesto setting the object or "image-object" before the mind (Kerouac, *Good Blonde* 69). He then 'blows' or improvises on that theme, sketching his intellectual and emotional responses or (as Kerouac puts it) "following free deviation ... of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought." The poet records these responses in "personal secret idea-words," much as soloists use certain familiar phrasings and chord-combinations to personalize their statements (69).⁹⁸ Naturally, then, in spontaneous writing, form is not determined prior to the performance, but by the performance itself: "the rhythm of how you decide to 'rush' yr statement," Kerouac avers, "determines the rhythm of the poem" (76).

The title of his manifesto notwithstanding, Kerouac also used his Spontaneous Prose method to create a significant body of poetry, as the statement quoted

⁹⁸ Kerouac also tied his theory of phrasing to Williams' attempt to write in the "'measured pauses which are the essentials of our speech'" (69).

immediately above suggests. In 1961, the author submitted a typescript of *San Francisco Blues* to Donald Allen with a carefully worded introduction that outlined the particulars of the volume's composition. Kerouac calls the individual poems "choruses" (Kerouac, *Heaven* 56), a chorus being "any statement of, or, more particularly, any restatement with variations, of a theme" (Kernfeld 208). In the choruses of *San Francisco Blues*, the theme (the object or "image-object") is typically a detail that piques the interest of the poet as he looks on "winos and bebop winos and whores and Cop cars" from the window of his room in the Cameo Hotel (Kerouac, *Selected Letters* 411). The subject might provoke reflection, or evoke a surge of memories, associations that Kerouac would then explore in his improvisation. Thus, the individual choruses record not merely "the ambience of the tenement streets ..., passers-by, objects and incidents," but also "the author's musings and meditations" on his theme (Stephenson 3).

In "10th Chorus," for example, Kerouac's theme is a "sad old bum" observed leaving a neighbourhood store with a "cube of oleo" (*Book of Blues* 11). The poet sets the object before his mind, and then begins to improvise on it:

So in cheap rooms
At A M 3 30
He can cough & groan
In a white tile sink
By his bed
Which is used
To run water in

And stagger to
 In the reel of wake up
 Middle of the night
 Flophouse Nightmares—

(11)

This passage marks a transition in the conceptual movement of the poem, from the details that the author literally observes, to his speculations about the derelict. Like jazz improvisation, these spontaneous responses reflect the self of the poet, his personality, his unique style of expression, and his spiritual and emotional condition at the moment of writing. Kerouac expresses a sense of empathy when he fantasizes about the derelict's tragic life on skid row, a sense almost of kinship that originates in the poet's experience in the Cameo Hotel:

His death no blackern
 Mine, his Toast's
 Just as well buttered
 And on the one side.

(11)

"10th Chorus" is a typical example both of the acute sensitivity that Kerouac often exhibited to the conditions of life in a San Francisco slum, and of how he shaped his verse into jazz-like structures, structures that reflected the energy of the original inspiration. In "15th Chorus," this basic structure of theme and variation recurs, the conceptual focus or theme in this case being a sound, rather than a sight:

Sex is an automaton

Sounding like a machine
 Thru the stopped up keyhole
 —Young men go fastern
 Old men
 Old men are passionately
 breathless
 Young men breathe inwardly
 Young women & old women
 Wait

There was a sound of slapping
 When the angel stole come
 And the angel that had lost
 Lay back satisfied

Hungry addled red face
 With tight clutch
 Traditional Time
 Brief case in his paw
 Prowls placking the pavement
 To his office girl's
 Rumped skirt at 5's
 Five O Clock Shadows

(16)

The connection between the sound and an automaton seems impelled in part by Kerouac's sense that skid row life lacks brio or verve, an impression formed from his daily experiences with the urban downtrodden—the "Harried Mexican Laborers," "the sad old bum," and "the furtive whore," depicted in the sixth, tenth, and twelfth choruses, respectively.

The intrusive noise triggers three responses that are rendered as improvised details, verbal analogues to jazz solos. In "Essentials," Kerouac urged writers to punctuate their prose not with "false colons and timid usually needless commas," but with "the vigorous space dash," which, he felt, could indicate more effectively the momentary

pauses or natural turns in thought, or "the rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement" (*Good Blonde* 69). The dash in line four, for example, suggests the conceptual shift from the theme as such to the first of Kerouac's improvised responses, which constitutes a speculation about how sexual performance differs with age and gender. In the second response, the poet articulates a surreal vision of the couple in the next room, a vision prompted by the "sound of slapping" that penetrates to his room. The third response suggests a vision of infidelity evoked by the activity Kerouac observes from his window.

In "15th Chorus," the poet records each improvised response in separate stanzas. Not all of his choruses exhibit such clear demarcations, for Kerouac insisted first on allowing the individual circumstances of each performance to dictate the length and structure of the expression. In "59th Chorus," for example, the transitions between theme and variation, and from one variation to the next, are somewhat more subtle, more fluid than those in "15th Chorus," and these transitions are directly related to the poet's spiritual condition during the act of writing:

IL
W
U
Has tough white seamen
Scrapping snow white hats
In favor of iron clubs
To wave in inky newsreels

(*Book of Blues* 60)

The acronym suggests an attempt by the poet to reproduce a banner or a sign literally within his field of vision. The object that Kerouac subsequently sets before his mind as his theme is the "tough white seamen" he views in newsreels, perhaps pulled from the archives of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union.⁹⁹ These images draw the poet into a romantic reflection on the turbulence of west-coast America during the Great Depression, and on the beginning of the country's involvement in World War II:

When Frisco was a drizzle
 And Curran all sincere
 Bryson just a baby,
 Reuther bloodied up,
 —When publications
 Of Union pamphleteers
 Featured human rock jaws
 Jutting Editorialese
 Composed by angry funny

⁹⁹ 1954 marked the twentieth anniversary of the beginning of a period of worker unrest in San Francisco, as dockworkers and seamen staged a series of strikes from 1934 to 1937 in an effort to unionize against their employers. The activity to which Kerouac refers in this chorus began on 9 May 1934, as twelve thousand workers along the west coast of the United States went on strike, shutting down all ports for three months. On 5 July, a day that history remembers as "Bloody Thursday," San Francisco police killed two waterfront pickets and injured dozens of others with bullets, clubs, and teargas, in a fierce battle that raged for hours on the docks of the city. "The '34 men who lived to tell about their experiences enjoyed a privileged status within the union" (Kimeldorf 110). Given the importance that the union ascribed to these events, it is not surprising that the struggles of the "'34 men" were celebrated on the twentieth anniversary of the first strikes. On 5 July 1954, for example, ILWU longshoremen stopped work "to commemorate Bloody Thursday" ("ILWU Longshoremen" 3). It is conceivable that Kerouac, being an ex-seaman himself, visited the ILWU during his brief stay in San Francisco, and spoke to some of the surviving "'34 men."

redhead editors
 Walking with their heads down
 To catch the evening fleet
 And wave goodbye to sailors
 passing rosely dreams
 Into a sparkling cannon
 Gray & spicked & span
 To shine the Admiral
 In his South Pacific pan—

(*Book of Blues* 60)

Kerouac's first 'solo' takes the form of a brief catalogue, the rhythm of which moves with the flow of a mind inspired with the revolutionary spirit of 1930s trade unionism.

The worker-led revolution imaged in Kerouac's theme invokes romantic notions of the noble struggles of the downtrodden worker that play out in the improvisation, visions perhaps enhanced by the poet's skid row surroundings, and by past experience. In 1942, Kerouac served in the Merchant Marine as a scullion aboard the *S.S. Dorchester*. By invoking Hugh Bryson (president of the Marine Cooks and Stewards of the Pacific Coast until 1950), the poet associates himself with the union brotherhood that participated in the protests and revolutions of the thirties.

The enjambment of lines seven and eight of the above passage simulates progression at the speed of thought. By deferring the completion of the image of the "human rock jaws" to line eight, Kerouac creates a fluid transition from one idea to the next that approximates the subtle shifts in "phrase-meaning" in an improvisation (1). The new idea, which begins with the word "Editorialese," focuses on

America's involvement in World War II. Again, this solo may be driven in part by his past experience. Longshoremen began shipping out of San Francisco to serve in the battle for the South Pacific in May, 1942. While Kerouac himself was not involved in this historic battle, he did see combat aboard the *S.S. Dorchester* (the destroyer escorting her sank a German vessel). Thus, in "59th Chorus," Kerouac's statement is driven by an historical theme. The poet proceeds from what he calls in "Essentials" a "jewel center of interest" in his subject (*Good Blonde* 70); the film images evoke memories in Kerouac of the America of his youth that he explores in two solos.

Although my analysis to this point may suggest it, not all of Kerouac's choruses are self-contained units of completed themes and variations. The introduction to *San Francisco Blues* suggests that the poet worked within the dimensions of a small notebook page when composing his choruses, allowing the individual poems to evolve freely within that formal/material compass, much as the jazz musician composed within the restrictions of "a set number of bars" (1). However, there were points during the writing when the natural exuberance of the author prompted expression that could not be contained on a single notebook page. In such cases, Kerouac continued to follow the poem in question onto the next page, thus overlapping one chorus

onto the next.¹⁰⁰

The first five choruses of the volume provide a salient example of this structural overlapping. Kerouac repeats certain motifs in the first three to suggest his attempt to orient himself to his milieu (for example, the phrase "3rd St" appears in the second and third choruses; and imagery of commerce, throughout the first three). The poet attends to stating and restating (warming to) his theme, which process triggers a series of associations that are released in the fourth and fifth choruses as an extensive improvisation. Kerouac 'sketches' a building near his hotel in the fourth chorus as a means of restating his theme once more:

The rooftop of the beatup
tenement
On 3rd & Harrison
Has Belfast painted
Black on yellow
On the side
the old Frisco wood is
shown with weatherbeaten
rainboards & a
washed out blue bottle
once painted for wild
commercial reasons by
an excited seltzerite...

(*Book of Blues* 5)¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ As he claims in his introduction, "sometimes the word-meaning can carry from one chorus into another" (1). See also the Author's Note to *Mexico City Blues*, in which Kerouac avers that sometimes his ideas "roll ... from halfway through a chorus to halfway into the next" (np).

¹⁰¹ John Montgomery clarifies some of the references in "4th Chorus," identifying "Belfast" as an ale and the "washed out blue bottle" as a Bromo Seltzer bottle (94). Kerouac's focus here seems to be an advertisement painted on the side

The theme here prompts a series of thoughts and reflections in the form of improvised details, the first of which is a memory of firemen called to a false alarm on the previous afternoon. The improvisation then evolves in complexity:

so, is Belfast singin
in this time

when brand's forgotten
taste washed in
rain the gullies broadened
& every body gone
the acrobats of the
tenement
who dug bel fast
divers all
and the divers all dove

(5-6)

The improvisation issues from the poet's observation of the ad, while the verbal playfulness of the excerpt registers Kerouac's emotional state at the moment of composition, simulates a 'blow.' What is most noteworthy is the fact that Kerouac does not impose closure on his statement in the process of filling up the page of his notebook. The fourth chorus ends at line two of the above passage. Yet, the poet allows his interest and excitement to find their natural terminus (which occurs in the middle of "5th Chorus") before picking up a new theme.

This technique of 'enjambéd' choruses occurs elsewhere

of a building near his hotel.

in *San Francisco Blues*.¹⁰² As choruses one to four clearly show, however, there is another type of structural overlapping that occurs in the volume: the repetition of certain themes in consecutive choruses. Choruses forty-two to forty-four focus on children as victims of urban society—a recurrent theme in the volume, and one which naturally ties in with Kerouac's love of blues.¹⁰³ Blues is a music created by African-Americans in the early twentieth century as an outlet for their suffering and despair. In his own "jazz blues" choruses (1), Kerouac laments for the despondent of San Francisco, but primarily for the children:

Little boys are angels
 Crying in the street
 Wear funny hats
 Wait for green lights
 Carry bust out tubes
 Around their necks
 And roam the railyards
 Of the great cities
 Looking for locomotives
 Full of shit
 Run down to the waterfront
 And dream of Cathay
 Hook spars with Gulls
 Of athavoid thought.

(43)¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² See especially choruses thirty-three to thirty six, thirty-six to forty-two, and sixty-four to sixty-eight.

¹⁰³ Kerouac also demonstrates his love of blues in choruses thirty-six to thirty-nine, which are written in the form of blues lyrics.

¹⁰⁴ See also the fifth, seventh, seventeenth, thirtieth, and forty-sixth choruses.

The scoring of the line suggests, by analogy, the movement natural to free visualizing. Kerouac focuses directly on the subject matter in the first line, and subsequently embellishes the theme with additional details. When the poet has completely familiarized himself with his subject, his imagination takes over. The conjunction in line twelve signals a shift from observation to reflection. The setting in which the poet encounters the children initiates his reflection on their struggle to escape their harsh urban surroundings, a response rooted in Kerouac's personal fantasies as a child.¹⁰⁵ Seeing his own childhood entrapment in the boys, the poet creates an escape for them by projecting his own childhood fantasies onto their situation.

In "43rd Chorus," Kerouac restates his theme with a quick sketch, and then continues to explore that theme in a new variation. The object in this chorus is a boy, "Little Cody Deaver," whom he observes on the streets of San Francisco (*Book of Blues* 44). The child's name is significant, indicative as it is of personal associations explored in this chorus. In *Visions of Cody*, *The Dharma*

¹⁰⁵ Kerouac's biographers concur that the author had a vivid imagination as a child, and often envisioned himself in heroic and adventurous situations. Kerouac often "slipped away to roam fields and riverbanks by himself" (Nicosia, *Memory Babe* 38). At thirteen years of age, he hitchhiked to Boston and "stroll[ed] along the docks daydreaming of stowing away to Europe," of escaping the often "stifling" environment of a strict Catholic family (McNally 17).

Bums, Desolation Angels, and Big Sur, Kerouac's pseudonym for Neal Cassady is Cody Pomeray. The surname of the boy in the forty-third chorus could perhaps be a pun on "Denver," the city of Cassady's upbringing. In short, one could read the poem as an improvisation on Neal Cassady's childhood:

Little Cody Deaver
 A San Francisco boy
 Hung by hair of heroes
 Growing green & thin
 And soft as sin
 From the tie piles
 Of the railer road
 Track where Tokay
 Bottles rust in dust

(44)

Ostensibly, the improvisation maps out what Kerouac envisions as the wayward lifestyle of Cody Deaver, a lifestyle of loneliness, struggle, and deprivation. Yet, one could contend that the poet's perception of Deaver as a streetwise boy starving in the railyard is based in part on Kerouac's knowledge of Cassady's childhood, and therefore that the poet's personal associations, as much as those things he literally sees before him, are what drive the improvisation. Kerouac's friend, who grew up in the slums of Denver with his alcoholic father, lived for the most part on the streets and found what little to eat he could in men's missions. This errant lifestyle afforded Cassady the freedom "to observe grown-up activities and to explore areas of the city normally forbidden to those his age" (Nicosia, "Neal Cassady" 94). Life on the streets was fraught with

peril for the young boy, and he matured very quickly,
learning to rely on his own strength and guile to
survive.¹⁰⁶

The poet's musings on the suffering and deprivation of
his subject culminate—as does his solo—in a romantic
vision of the death of Deaver/Cassady:

Waiting for the term
Of partiality
To end up there
In heaven high
So's loco can
Come home
Con poco coco.

(*Book of Blues* 44)

Cassady was a baptized Catholic and served, at age ten, "as
an altar boy at Holy Ghost Church, where his godfather was a
priest." Cassady himself was, for a time, "utterly absorbed
by the lives of the saints," and "even thought to become a
Christian Brother" (Plummer 22). The "term of partiality"
of the forty-third chorus is perhaps an oblique reference to
the Judgement Day of Christian faith, and the first two

¹⁰⁶ The image of Cody Deaver starving in the railyard could
also be driven by Kerouac's knowledge of a specific
incident in Cassady's childhood, which occurred on a
freight train ride when the boy was only six years old: "At
a water station, his father had left their boxcar to get
some water for them, and the train had started up before he
could get back to his son. For several hours the six-
year-old boy agonized in utter despair, imagining he would
never see his father again—till, at the next stop, he
discovered that the old man had managed to climb into a
different boxcar farther to the rear" (Nicosia, "Neal
Cassady" 94). See also Cassady's personal account in his
autobiography *The First Third* (90-92).

lines of the quoted excerpt could thus suggest that Deaver/Cassady is weary of the life of deprivation that he leads, and hopes "to end up there [soon] / In heaven high."

The seventieth to the seventy-second choruses comprise another sequence in which a single theme, repeated in each poem, provides the conceptual focus of Kerouac's performative expression. The poet states this theme in the first two lines of the seventieth chorus: "3rd St is like Moody St / Lowell Massachusetts" (*Book of Blues* 71). The thematic focus in this sequence is the similarity in atmosphere that Kerouac perceives between two American cities. In the process of observing the particulars of 3rd Street, the poet is reminded of the Moody Street of the mid-thirties, and he is drawn instantly into an exploration of his personal past.¹⁰⁷ This shift is registered in the following improvisation:

It has Bagdad blue
 Dusk down sky
 And hills with lights
 And pale the hazel
 Gentle blue in the
 burned windows
 Of wooden tenements
 And lights of bars
 music brawl,
 "Hoap!" "Hap!" & "Hi"

(71)

The improvisation maps out the connections between specific

¹⁰⁷ The poet lived in a tenement apartment on Moody Street from 1936 until he enrolled at Horace Mann.

aspects of Kerouac's skid row environment and his personal memories of the industrial city of his birth: the sky at sunset, the quality of light cast upon the street and upon the buildings and their windows, and the dynamic night-life of the city. This mental activity culminates in an acknowledgement by the poet that "a break of personalities" has 'happened' in the process of 'blowing' on his subject—that there are two sides of himself driving his artistic vision in the chorus: one from the present and the other from the past.

Kerouac begins the seventy-first chorus by restating his theme, but with a slightly different focus, on the resemblance between his skid row hotel and an unidentified hotel in Lowell. This theme again prompts a series of associations between San Francisco and Lowell signed in a collage of free-floating details:

—The same hot hungry
 harried hotel
 wild Charlies dozzling
 to fold the
 Food papers in the
 mahogany talk
 Of television reading room
 Balls are walled
 and withered
 and long fergit.

Moody Lowell Third Street
 Sick & tired bedsprings
 Silhouettes of brownlace
 eve night dowse—
 All that—
 And outsida town
 The aching snake
 Pronging underground
 To come eat up

Us the innocent
And insincere in here

(72)

The snake is an image culled from Kerouac's childhood memories. In March, 1936, the Merrimack River flooded its banks, devastating many of the homes and businesses of Lowell, including Kerouac's father's printing press. In *Doctor Sax*, Book Five, Kerouac recounts his childhood fear and awe of the sheer power of the river: standing on the banks of the river and observing the flood, he saw the Merrimack as "an evil monster bent on devouring everyone—for no special reason." Further, the author describes the swelling river as having "the scaly ululating back of a sea monster, of a Snake" (179, 168). In the process of improvising on his theme, Kerouac draws a connection between the "snake" of his childhood memory and the "crowdy earthquake / cataract," the San Andreas fault line (*Book of Blues* 73).

Like the first five choruses of the volume, the seventy-first and seventy-second choruses overlap. Kerouac continues to explore memories of Lowell triggered by the landscape of San Francisco:

And Budapest Counts
Driving lonely mtn. cars
On the hem of the grade
Of the lip curve hill
Where Rockly meets
Out Market & More—
The last shore—
View of the sea

Seal

(73)

Here, the poet conflates mind or memory with perception and landscape. The image of the "Budapest Counts" is an allusion to the villain of Kerouac's childhood fantasy, a vampire named Count Condu. The young Kerouac romantically envisioned this vampire as living in a castle on what he called "Snake Hill" on the outskirts of Lowell. The poet recreates that childhood fantasy in *Doctor Sax*, where he describes the count as a native of Budapest, "sibilant, sharp-tongued, aristocratic, snappy, mawk-mouthed" (23). In "72nd Chorus," Kerouac recalls his childhood fantasy and projects it onto an area of San Francisco that bears some geological similarity in his mind to "Snake Hill": the southwest end of Market Street.¹⁰⁸

San Francisco Blues captures Kerouac's responses in all their temporal immediacy, from the most mundane of impressions to the most mantic of insights. It is a deeply spiritual poem, an affectionate portrait of one of Kerouac's favourite American cities, and a record of the tender emotions evoked in the poet during his brief stay there. It is thus with sadness that he prophesies at the end of the poem that

¹⁰⁸ This area boasts three of the city's most prominent hills (Twin Peaks and Mt. Davidson), all of which are over nine hundred feet high, and which would therefore afford a "view of the sea."

This pretty white city
 On the other side of the country
 Will no longer be
 Available to [him]

(*Book of Blues* 81)

for, like a musician on tour, Kerouac did not remain in San Francisco for very long after the final notes of his performance had been sounded. In late April, 1954, he returned to his mother's home in Richmond Hill, New York, where he began working on other projects.

Jazz provided Kerouac with an effective means for conceiving and executing a new method of composition in postwar America, "a model by which he could contemplate, conceptualize, and finally invent a new poetics—a poetics that took shape first in his fiction in 1951 and later in his poetry" (Jones 79). The musician's philosophy of stating the self by improvisation substantially accorded with Kerouac's desires as a postwar American poet to write not from within tradition, but from within the circumstances of the creative act. Like jazz improvisation, Kerouac's jazz blues choruses are ultimately about the process of their own making.

* * *

Kerouac wrote his "Essentials" at the request of fellow Beat writers William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, both of whom were taken at the time with the style of his *The*

Subterraneans. Ginsberg was developing his own style of writing in the early fifties, and Kerouac's manifesto reinforced many of the basic principles of Williams' theory. Together with Williams' "Relative Measure," Kerouac's Spontaneous Prose method guided Ginsberg in the creation of his strongest works, including "Howl," "Kaddish," "Wichita Vortex Sutra," and his poem-as-travelogue *The Fall of America*.

CHAPTER 6

TRANSCRIPTION OF "CAR BUS AIRPLANE DREAM CONSCIOUSNESS":

ALLEN GINSBERG'S *THE FALL OF AMERICA*¹⁰⁹

Observing the flashings on the mind. As somebody said, the craft is observing the mind. Formerly the "Craft" used to be an idea of re-arranging your package.... Fresher method of getting at that material [from the subconscious] is to watch mind flow instantaneously, to realize that all that is, is there in the storehouse of the mind within the instant any moment.... What is going on in the mind during that moment is the subject.

(Ginsberg, "Craft Interview" 20-21)

At Concordia University (Montreal) in March, 1994, approaching his seventieth birthday, Allen Ginsberg delivered a spirited reading, a retrospective of work that spanned almost fifty years. During the reading, he provided detailed and instructive commentary on his poems, outlining the circumstances that prompted their creation, and contextualizing them within the various stages of his development as a writer. He also discussed the influence of

¹⁰⁹ The quotation is taken from Ginsberg's *The Fall of America* (189).

many of his fellow poets on his work over the years, and of Williams in particular.

On 28 March 1950, Ginsberg, then living in Paterson, attended a reading by Williams at the Guggenheim. Ginsberg later recalled that he was particularly fascinated that night by "The Clouds," because he could discern no standard (or even recognizable) metrical pattern from Williams' reading of the poem:

And when he read it, he read it almost
 impatiently, (*fast*) "Plunging upon a moth, a
 butterfly, a pissmire, hupp...." And then he
 waved his hands in the air—he just gave up.
 So I suddenly realized it was just like
 somebody talking in a bar, not finishing the
 sentence but just giving up with a gesture
 of impatience, and that it was a syntactical
 fact of speech that had never been written
 down before in poetry—and so I suddenly
 realized that his poetry was absolutely
 identical with speech....

(cited from Colbert 296)

Ginsberg was so intrigued by Williams' use of speech patterns as a measure for poetry that, the very next day, he sent Williams several of his own poems with a letter of introduction. Like much of his early verse, as collected in *The Gates of Wrath* (1972), these poems emerged in iambic

tetrameter and pentameter, couplets and quatrains, and ballad and ode forms, since, as a young writer, Ginsberg sought "to eternalize experience by converting the actual into myth and symbol, into traditional forms and often deliberately archaic language" (Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary* 87). True to form, Williams rejected Ginsberg's offerings: "'In this mode, perfection is basic'... and Allen's poems were imperfect" (Miles 126). Intrigued (although also understandably disappointed) by the response, Ginsberg began studying Williams' work very closely, and then, once he had familiarized himself with the theory of "Relative Measure," he began selecting prose entries from his own journals and arranging them "according to how they might be spoken, and where [he] might take a breath" (Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim* 140). Two such early experiments are "The Bricklayer's Lunch Hour" and "In Society," both later collected in Ginsberg's *Empty Mirror* (1961). Williams' response to these poems was much more enthusiastic.

Kerouac's experiments in spontaneous writing reinforced for Ginsberg the pertinence of Williams' theory. As indicated above, Kerouac was just discovering a new compositional technique himself in the early fifties; and, when he began formulating his Spontaneous Prose method, he encouraged Ginsberg to try 'sketching':

At that time [1951] I was still writing very

laborious square rhymed verse and revising, revising and revising. He was on my neck to improvise more and not to get hung up but I resisted that for a long, long time. All my conceptions of literature, everything I was taught at Columbia, would fall down if I followed him on that scary road! So it took me a long time to realize the enormous amount of freedom and intuition that he was opening up in composition.

(*Composed on the Tongue* 80)

While Ginsberg, initially at least, may have been reluctant to abandon all his "conceptions of literature," he exaggerates the length of time that it took him to warm to Kerouac's method. As early as April, 1952, Ginsberg expressed interest in "Kerouac's idea of prose sketching," his technique of "merely looking up at details & noting them down as they come to [the writer's] attention" (*Journals: Early Fifties, Early Sixties* 8, 9). Scarcely one month later, that interest became a consuming passion.

With this exposure to the work of Kerouac and Williams came a radical change in Ginsberg's approach to writing, as he worked at developing a more personal means of expression. *Howl and Other Poems* (1956), his first major achievement in a new style, as he later described it in *The New American Poetry*, aspired to a condition like improvisation:

By 1955 I wrote poetry adapted from prose seeds, journals, scratchings, arranged by phrasing or breath groups into little short-line patterns according to ideas of measure of American speech I'd picked up from W.C. Williams' imagist preoccupations. I suddenly turned aside in San Francisco, unemployment compensation leisure, to follow my romantic inspiration—Hebraic-Melvillian bardic breath. I thought I wouldn't write a *poem*, but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind....

(cited from Allen 414-15)

Ginsberg's coy distinction between his own work and poetry is curious; it seems paradoxical for a poet to insist that he does not write poetry. Yet, an attending to the literary climate in America during the forties and fifties enables us better to grasp the import of Ginsberg's statement. Predictably, many critics were initially hostile to "Howl," and betrayed patent misunderstandings of the poet's method. Virtually from the moment of its public release, Ginsberg found himself in the unenviable position of having to defend his new, experimental work against the attacks of single-minded critics who valued—even over-valued—well-wrought verse. In his reply to John Hollander's review, for

example, Ginsberg brought the critic up short for advancing an awkwardly limited poetic:

Anyway there is a definite experiment in FORM
 FORM FORM and not a ridiculous idea of what
 form *should* be like. And it is an example
 that has all sorts of literary precedents in
 French poetry, in Hart Crane, in—but this
 whole camp of FORM is so ridiculous that I am
 ashamed to have to use the word to justify
 what is THERE. (and only use it in a limited
 academic context but would not dream of using
 this kindergarten terminology in poets from
 whom I *learn*—Kerouac, Burroughs or Corso—
 who start to new worlds of their own invention
 with minds so Columbian & holy that I am
 ashamed of my own academic Tribe that is so
 superciliously hung on COLLEGE that it has
 lost touch with living creation.)

(cited from Kramer 169-70)¹¹⁰

Ginsberg's position on the craft of poetry in 1959 now becomes somewhat clearer. In dissociating his work from 'poetry,' he was striking out against established styles of verse, and against the accepted view of the poem as nothing

¹¹⁰ As we have seen, Ginsberg's stance on poetic form was common among postwar poets. The rhetoric of this passage perhaps reminds us, for example, of Creeley's letter to Olson of 5 June 1950.

more than artifact. His new method involved not the shaping of creative energy into "an arbitrarily preconceived pattern" (cited from Allen and Tallman 325), but the "transcribing" of "the naked activity of [the] mind" (Ginsberg, "Craft Interview" 17).¹¹¹ Such a technique necessarily demanded a form capable of representing the rush of the poet's joys, fears, ecstasies, and neuroses in their original energy.

Like Creeley, Ginsberg conceives of form as an extension of the poem's subject matter: "The only pattern of value or interest in poetry," Ginsberg argues, "is the solitary, individual pattern peculiar to the poet's moment & the poem *discovered* in the mind & in the process of writing it out on the page, as notes, transcriptions—reproduced in the fittest accurate form, at the time of composition.... Mind is shapely, art is shapely" (cited from Allen and

¹¹¹ Ginsberg has often described his technique as a kind of transcription. In his April, 1952 notebook entry, for example, the poet assesses his writing as "a literal transcription of [his] thoughts as they occur" (*Journals: Early Fifties, Early Sixties* 11). And in a letter of 18 May 1956, to Richard Eberhart, Ginsberg identifies "the technical problem of the present day" as "the problem of Transcription of the natural flow of the mind, the transcription of the melody of actual thought or speech" (cited from Eberhart 27). The poet has also claimed that, for him, the making of poetry is a matter of "registering [his] spontaneous impulses of feeling and perception" (cited from Bell 12), of "observing what is going on in the mind and writing it down" (cited from Faas 284).

Tallman 325-26).¹¹² Believing that inherited formulations are "too symmetrical, geometrical, numbered and pre-fixed" for rendering the activity of the mind with accuracy and precision (324), Ginsberg insists that it is in that activity itself, in "the structure of thought," that the poet may find the means to the most suitable form (cited from Kramer 171).¹¹³

Ginsberg has explored many ways of documenting the mind's workings, perhaps more than has any other poet of his generation. Early in his career, he wrote a number of poems while under the influence of different types of narcotics, so as to realize a record of his thoughts and impressions in a heightened state of awareness.¹¹⁴ For much of his life, he has also been interested in Buddhism, an interest he has

¹¹² See also Ginsberg's essay "Back to the Wall," in which he argues that, in contemporary American poetry, there has been a "renaissance of individual sensibility carried thru the vehicle of individualized metrics" (679). The phrase "Mind is shapely, art is shapely," taken from Kerouac's "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose," has also been cited by Creeley in defence of his method (*Collected Essays* 494).

¹¹³ See also the introduction to Chögyam Trungpa's *First Thought Best Thought*, in which Ginsberg avers that "the mind [is the] model ... of literary form and content" (xii).

¹¹⁴ Typically, these poems are "just experiments, specific experiments with specific drugs" (cited from Selerie 40), records of how Ginsberg's mind reacted to illicit substances. See especially "Marijuana Notation" (1951), "Kaddish" (1957-59), "Laughing Gas" (1958), "Lysergic Acid" (1959), "Mescaline" (1959), "Aether" (1960), and "Wales Visitation" (1967). Ginsberg also discusses these compositions and the effects that various drugs had on his writing in his *Nimrod* interview (Cargas 27-28).

shared with Kerouac, Snyder, and Whalen in discussions of the scriptures and sutras. When he began Zen training under Tibetan lama Chögyam Trungpa (in 1971), Ginsberg began to explore that interest in his poetry. Trungpa instructed him to a heightened awareness of his surroundings, and taught him how to observe "the procession of thought forms" (Ginsberg, "Meditation and Poetics" 150). Also in 1971, Ginsberg recorded an album with Bob Dylan, four songs from which later appeared in *First Blues* (1975).

Of Ginsberg's more recent interests, perhaps the most central has been the oral traditions of the Australian aboriginal peoples. The tribal chronicler facilitates the collective creation with "song-sticks," which he claps together to establish and keep a beat: "Usually what happens is that the song-men will beat out a line and then the village people will repeat the line after them with their own song-sticks or little pieces of branch or boughs or whatever clack stick they can find" (cited from Selerie 15).¹¹⁵

In addition to exploring ancient or even 'primitive' means of spontaneous expression, Ginsberg has experimented with recent technology in his writing. In 1965, Bob Dylan gave the poet six hundred dollars as a Christmas present to buy himself a state-of-the-art reel-to-reel Uher tape

¹¹⁵ Song sticks have been integral to Ginsberg's readings since the seventies.

recorder. Ginsberg's interest in the Uher paralleled Olson's fascination with the typewriter as a tool for composition. By typographical notations, symbols, and spacing, the writer could indicate, precisely enough, the rhythm and pacing of the work in process, just as (so Olson observed) a composer indicates tempo with time signatures, rests, measures, and various types of notes (*Selected Writings* 22). In his introduction to *Visions of Cody*, Ginsberg cites as one of Kerouac's most significant achievements the use of the tape recorder to document, as it were, the energy and intensity of the book's hero, Neal Cassady: "Jack Kerouac's style of transcription of taped conversation is, also, impeccably accurate in syntax punctuation—separation of elements for clarity...labeling of voices, parenthesizing of interruptions. A model to study" ("Great Rememberer" ix). Ginsberg indeed found this technique "a model to study," for he composed much of his poetry between 1965 and 1970 with his Uher tape recorder (Mackenzie 242), the defining achievement of these particular experiments being his poem-as-travelogue, *The Fall of America*.

Before beginning a cross-country trip in December, 1965, Ginsberg and some friends stayed a week at Lawrence Ferlinghetti's cabin at Big Sur. Ginsberg spent considerable time on the beach, testing his new machine by recording mantra chants under the influence of narcotics

(Schumacher 457). The poet once said that using the Uher for composing was "basically the same process as [composing in] a notebook" (*Composed on the Tongue* 58). Yet, the machine was more beneficial to the writing process in some respects, as this trial demonstrated. The tape recorder enabled Ginsberg to retain a 'living' record not only of his thoughts, but of the incidental background noise that contributed to the atmosphere at the time of composition—details that could be relevant to the specific occasion, but that the poet might otherwise overlook or neglect to record during a typical writing process. And, for the poet composing during a long and frenetic road trip, this was an especially important benefit. The actual writing, which Ginsberg did after the trip, was simply a transcription of the raw material recorded on the tapes:

Now this Uher microphone has a little on-off gadget here (click!) and then when you hear the click it starts it again, so the way I was doing it was this (click!); when I clicked it on again it meant I had something to say.... So when transcribing, I pay attention to the clicking on and off of the machine, which is literally the pauses, as words come out of my—as I wait for phrases to formulate themselves.... And then, having paid attention to the clicks, arrange the phrasings on the page visually, as

somewhat the equivalent of how they arrive in the mind and how they're vocalized on the tape recorder.

(*Composed on the Tongue* 28-29)¹¹⁶

With his tapes, Ginsberg was able to reproduce precisely enough his experiences by scoring the written text according to "the thought-stops, breath-stops, runs of inspiration, changes of mind, startings and stoppings of the car," as indicated in the recordings by the clicking sound of the microphone (cited from Allen and Tallman 349). The poet signified such pauses in thought or motion with a line-break, making each poem in the volume an indicator of "the mind's impressionistic flow with its immediacy and attendant interruptions and digressions" (Johnson 28).¹¹⁷

Critics have remarked upon the apparent lack of a cohesive structure in *The Fall of America*. While generally pleased with the volume, Helen Vendler expresses reservations about Ginsberg's cataloguing technique, which (so she feels) renders the text overwhelming and even chaotic at points: "Ginsberg's avalanche of detail is like

¹¹⁶ The interested reader should consult the cited pages. In consideration of space, I have omitted the portion of this discussion in which Ginsberg demonstrates the method in practice, using a portion of his poem "Wichita Vortex Sutra."

¹¹⁷ Echoing Whalen, John Muckle calls *The Fall of America* "a record or graph of the mind as it actually operates, of the movement of consciousness" (17).

the rain of dust and lava that preserved Pompeii—here lies America, in literally thousands of its emanations" (207). Similarly, Charles Molesworth criticizes the "jumpy spontaneity" in the book, arguing that it offers the reader "little sense of a discursive or accretive structure" (51). The weakness of the volume, in Gerrit Henry's view, is its "mindless ticker-tape rhythms" (293). These concerns are worthy of consideration, although the critics' feelings of being overwhelmed by the text perhaps originate in a misdirected search for another kind of cohesion. All three critics find the lengthy and detailed descriptions unfocussed and mentally exhausting. And so they should, if, considering the size of America and the diversity of its cultures, they seek a cohesive structure in the geographical details of Ginsberg's travelogue.¹¹⁸ Yet, if the critics cannot find cohesiveness in the mass of geographical details (Ginsberg's depiction, and a consistent one in his oeuvre, of America's rural landscapes as breathtakingly beautiful and of its urban and industrial centres as ugly and polluted), it does not follow that the text fails to achieve its own kind of coherence.

In a 1968 interview with Michael Aldrich, Ginsberg previewed *The Fall of America*, insisting on its cohesion and

¹¹⁸ For example, Vendler laments what she sees as a shift in Ginsberg's latest poetry from "the minute particulars of mankind" to "the minute particulars of geography" (205).

unity even before it was completed:

[The individual poems] naturally tie together; they're all done the same way, during the same time period, by the same mind, with the same preoccupations and obsessions, during the same war. So I mean no matter which way they went they'd all go out from the same brain place.

In other words the very nature of the composition ties them together. You don't really have to have a beginning, middle and end—all they have to do is to register the contents of one consciousness during the time period.

(Ginsberg, *Composed on the Tongue* 27)

In our reading of the volume, we *do* get to know the geography of Ginsberg's America. But it is "the Now of the poet's ... consciousness," "ongoing and nonlinear" (Johnson 43) that provides this expansive, Whitmanic vision with a cohesive structure, rather than the detailed portraits of the American landscape.

Ginsberg has said that he was influenced in the composition of *The Fall of America* by *The Cantos* and *Paterson* (Mackenzie 259). Indeed, there is a certain degree of similarity between the "epic structure" of the three works (Ginsberg, "Pound's Influence" 7): in each long poem, the author simulates the complexity of the mind by interweaving, or juxtaposing, blocks of perception and

thought. Ginsberg regarded Pound's ideogrammic method—the "juxtaposition of images or jump-cut or montage or association"—as "a model of the actual activity of the mind itself." Rather than creating a "narrative or didactic logical or 'linear' structure" for *The Cantos*, Pound used "discontinuity as another continuity," what Ginsberg saw as "a more realistic version of notating how we think, moment by moment in real time" (7). Similarly, the interweaving of impressions, thoughts, and observations in *The Fall of America* creates a complex psychological tapestry—a representation of the mind of an artist slowly losing his faith in his nation as his sense of its ills and shortcomings grows more acute.

While the mood of the book is predominantly elegiac, it is not utterly devoid of optimism. Typically, Ginsberg seeks (and finds) refuge from urban and industrial America in the country's rural beauty. Nowhere in *The Fall of America* are these Thoreauvian sentiments more strongly expressed than in "Autumn Gold: New England Fall," one of the most touching examples of Ginsberg's "Auto Poesy" (*Fall* 27). The piece chronicles the poet's trip from Manhattan to Hanover on 17 October 1966, during which he experienced both the stunning natural beauty of the area and the industries threatening that environment. In "Autumn Gold," Ginsberg oscillates between the two emotional extremes of joy and despair, depending upon what he encounters on the road:

Coughing in the Morning

Waking with a steam beast, city destroyed
 Pile drivers pounding down in rubble,
 Red smokestacks pouring chemical
 into Manhattan's Nostrils—...
 "All Aboard"

(48)

The poem begins with the first details that register in Ginsberg's waking mind. The noise and pollution of Manhattan, rudely and abruptly awakening the poet, strongly motivate him to leave the city, which sense of urgency is marked by the dash and ellipsis at the end of line five, and by the exclamation in line six. Ginsberg then begins his journey through some of the most beautiful terrain in the country: "Rust colored cliffs bulking over superhighway / to New Haven, / Rouged with Autumn leaves, october smoke" (48). In "Autumn Gold," the leaves remind the poet of a natural cycle, an "ageless physical beauty" (Schumacher 459) that predates industrial America, that nurtures in him a "planetary vision" (*Fall* 48).¹¹⁹

Ginsberg's exhilaration quickly turns to despair, however, when a commercial announcement distracts him from the spectacular scenery of Connecticut:

¹¹⁹ Like other poets of his acquaintance (chief among them Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Michael McClure), Ginsberg is intensely sensitive to ecological issues, and he uses his art to enlighten his readers on the environmental dangers posed by industrialization. For a brief, yet engaging overview of this ecological awareness in contemporary American poetry, see Theodore Roszak's *From Satori to Silicon Valley: San Francisco and the American Counterculture*.

country liquor bells on the Radio—
 Eat Meat and you're a beast
 Smoke Nicotine & your meat'll multiply
 with tiny monsters of cancer,
 Make Money & yr mind be lost in a million green papers,
 —Smell burning rubber by the steamshovel—

(48)

The liquor ad prompts Ginsberg to reflect on the detrimental effects of smoking and eating red meat, and on America's obsession with material gain. As this train of thought develops, the poet's attention is drawn to more unsavoury aspects of the landscape; the pleasant smells of "october smoke" are replaced by the smell of burning rubber on a construction site. The dashes framing line six sign the sudden intrusion of the toxic smell on the poet's consciousness.

A chance encounter with a graveyard then causes Ginsberg to ponder one of the most serious problems facing America in the sixties:

Mammals with planetary vision & long noses,
 riding a green small Volkswagen up three lane
 concrete road
 past the graveyard
 dotted w/tiny american flags waved in breeze,
 Washington Avenue:
 Sampans battling in waters off Mekong Delta
 Cuban politicians in Moscow, analysing China—

(48)

The cemetery of war-dead triggers a vision of military strategists plotting their conquests during the Vietnam

War.¹²⁰ The dash at the end of line eight marks another shift in perception, as Ginsberg tries to purge his mind of these negative thoughts by focusing once again on the multicoloured autumn leaves, the "sandstone / outcroppings," the "cows by yellow corn," and the "Connecticut woods / hanging under clouds" (48, 49). When the poet encounters more factories farther down the road, however, his attention turns again to the problem of urban pollution in America:

Weeping Willow, what's your catastrophe?
 Red Red oak, oh, what's your worry?
 Hairy Mammal whaddya want,
 What more than a little graveyard
 near the lake by airport road,
 Electric towers marching to Hartford,
 Buildingtops spiked in sky,
 asphalt factory cloverleafs spread over meadows
 Smoke thru wires, Connecticut River concrete wall'd
 past city central gastanks, glass boat bldgs.,
 downtown, ten blocks square,
 North, North on the highway, soon outa town,
 green fields.

(50)

Taking as his model the willow and the oak, Ginsberg initially tries to envision a simple, natural life for himself. The sixth line of the passage (flush left) indicates the terminus of that vision, the point at which an industrial complex first catches the traveller's eye. The assemblage of detail that follows simulates Ginsberg's

¹²⁰ Like many American citizens in the mid- to late-sixties, Ginsberg vehemently opposed his country's involvement in the Vietnam War, and wrote many poems in protest of that war, the most powerful of which is "Wichita Vortex Sutra" (*Collected Poems* 394-411).

Few of the poems in *The Fall of America* conclude on a note of such intense joy.¹²² Ginsberg is so often burdened by America's social and political problems that, in the end, even the idyllic settings of rural America cannot keep his spirits elevated for long. In "Hiway Poesy LA-Albuquerque-Texas-Wichita," the thought patterns are again driven by the landscapes the poet encounters on the road. During the trip, however, radio broadcasts and icons of industry and consumerism impinge more often upon his consciousness, plunging him more frequently into despair.

The poet is exhilarated at the beginning of his journey by the rugged beauty of the area just outside Los Angeles: "A wall, a wall, a Mesa Wall, There's desert / flat mountain shadows / miles along the pale pink floor..." (15-16). Yet, even at the beginning of the trip, his exhilaration is tempered by a sudden interruption:

Afternoon Light
 Children in back of a car
 with Bubblegum
 a flight of birds out of a dry field like mosquitos

"...several battalions of U.S. troops in a search and destroy operation in the Coastal plain near Bong Son, 300 mi. Northeast of Saigon. Thus far the fighting has been a series of small clashes. In a related action 25 miles to the South, Korean troops killed 35 Vietcong near Coastal highway Number One."

(14)

Ginsberg begins with a general observation of the

¹²² Two others that come to mind are "Easter Sunday" and "Falling Asleep in America."

surrounding area. The pattern of indentation figures the changes in his perspective, from that of his fellow travellers to a flock of birds suddenly taking flight. A news bulletin updating the progress of the Vietnam War then intrudes upon the peaceful scene, which intrusion the poet renders by juxtaposing a transcription of the broadcast with the observed details.

A constant backdrop in the volume, the radio broadcasts are directly responsible for the disintegration of Ginsberg's faith in America as a just and sacred nation. The poet is not merely barraged by news reports, but also frequently subjected to the diatribes of journalists, political leaders, and military personnel who support the escalation of the war:

Righto! The Navaho trail—
 Crescent moon setting on low hills West—
 Military forces over radio
 push bombing N. Vietnam.
Lifelines, sponsored by Henry L. Hunt, Beans.
 Dead voiced announcer, denouncing
 "a communist conspiracy among the youth...
 speakers on campuses/trained to condition
 idealistic brains..."

(18)

As Ginsberg enters the Navaho Trail, he notices the sun rising on the Painted Desert. His rapture soon turns to despair, however, as the talk show *Lifeline* bursts out over the airwaves. The poet signals this sudden shift in focus with the dash at the end of line two, and then records his response to the speaker's paranoid fears of America's

antiwar movement.¹²³

As in "Autumn Gold," it is not merely the unpleasant radio broadcasts that the poet finds distressing, but also the industrial landscapes that violate the natural beauty of the countryside:

PAINTED DESERT

petrified forest

Leslie Howard's scratchy '30s image

...eating jurassic steak

Petroglyphs over there the Man in the Moon,

the guy with four fingers...

over there, this is the sun, with two spikes out
the North,

two spikes South, two spikes ray East & West



Milky way over here, the Moon,

...and all the animal tentacles

Nebula spiraled "...Roger 1943"

And I hit Julius for eating his avocado cheese sandwich
too fast.

(18-19)

Travelling through the Painted Desert, Ginsberg is captivated by its timeless energy, as Olson was by that of

¹²³ Although his reactions to the talk show are not strongly conveyed in this particular excerpt, Ginsberg indicates elsewhere in the poem his belief that the goal of *Lifeline* is to promote fear and hatred in middle class Americans of communists and their sympathizers (*Fall* 24). In "Wichita Vortex Sutra," written approximately two weeks after "Hiway Poesy," the poet argues that the "Black Magic language" of political rhetoric and media reports is used as a vehicle for perpetuating the war (*Collected Poems* 401). See Paul Carroll's article on "Wichita Vortex Sutra" for an excellent reading of Ginsberg's attempt to combat such "Black Magic language" through poetry.

As Ginsberg nears the high-tech industrial complex, he is overwhelmed by the machinery of a contemporary corporation that he feels has little or no regard for the environment. The movement of the first five lines simulates the poet's observation of the refinery, and his contemplation of that setting. The base at Fort Wingate prompts a vision of a conspiratorial relationship between the military and multinational corporations of America, a diabolical plot to secure ultimate power and control over the minds of American soldiers. In Ginsberg's vision, the soldier serves his sentence not in Leavenworth, but on an offshore drilling rig, the implication being that the responsibility for his rehabilitation rests with big business—not with the military itself, not even with any form of conventional correctional institution.¹²⁵

The bitterness that Ginsberg expresses in "Hiway Poesy" toward what he perceives as the inhumanity and amorality of American industry recurs in what is perhaps his most strident critique in *The Fall of America*, "Northwest Passage." In this poem, Ginsberg lashes out at the nation's pulp and paper industry, envisioning factory runoff as

¹²⁵ Ginsberg's belief that the military and multinationals of America share a kind of business partnership is most poignantly expressed in "War Profit Litany" (*Fall* 72-73), in which the poet suggests that big business and the military are secretly united in the cause of perpetuating the Vietnam War for glory and profit. This poem, which resembles "Canto XLV" in attitude and approach, is dedicated to Pound.

"Sulphurous Urine" defiling America's natural resources.

The piece opens with a visual act in progress, the poet's observation of the "Horse Heaven Hills" of the northwest and of "Lake Wallula's flatness shimmering / Under Hat Rock" (115). Yet, as Ginsberg continues on his journey, more unsavoury details present themselves:

Chemical smoke boils up
 under aluminum-bright cloud-roof—
 Smog assembling over railroad
 cars parked rusting on thin rails—
 Factory looming vaster than Johnson
 Butte—Look at that Shit!
 Smell it! Got about 30 smokestacks going!
 Polluting Wallula! Boise Cascade—
 Container Corp!

The environmentally hazardous pulp and paper industry violates the poet's senses. In the first three lines, Ginsberg focuses intently on the chemical smoke billowing over the factory's railyard from numerous smoke-stacks. He then examines the factory itself, an edifice that physically overwhelms the surrounding landscape. The pollution triggers a spontaneous outburst of anger which subsequently draws him into two related patterns of thought:

*Wall Street Journal Apr. 22 full
 page ad Proclaimed:*

*We got the trees! We got
 the land beneath!
 We Gotta invent More Forms
 for Cardboard Country!
 We'll dig forests for Genius
 Spirit God Stuff Gold-root
 for Sale on Wall Street. Give
 us your money! order
 our cardboard Wastebaskets!
 We just invented throwaway Planets!*

Trees crash in Heaven! Sulphurous Urine
 pours thru Boise, Chevron & Brea
 Wastepipes where Snake & Wallula
 ripple shining...

(115-16)

In the first two stanzas, Ginsberg casts representatives of the industry in a satirical light, as enthusiastically promoting the commercial and economic benefits of clearcutting to the public. But the image of the "*throwaway Planets*" conjures a more prophetic vision in the last four lines of the far-reaching effects of industrial pollution on Washington, Idaho, and California.

As in "Autumn Gold," Ginsberg's perception of America here is shaped not merely by what he sees, but by the radio voices that he regularly hears:

A complete half-rainbow
 hill to hill across the highway
 pots of gold anchoring the pretty bridge,
 tumbleweed passing underneath

"Saigon (AP) U.S. B52 bombers made their heaviest raids of the Vietnam War last night near the Cambodian border, dropping more than 2,000 tons of bombs along a 30 mile stretch Northwest of Saigon, the US COMMAND reported. 'They are harassing enemy troops so as not to let them get organized,' an American SPOKESMAN said."

Czech student strikes unreported in Prague
 Howard Marquette & George Washington U. sit-in...

(118-19)

The first two lines represent the poet's observation of a rainbow that stretches over the highway, and the golden hills "anchoring" that rainbow at both ends. A rolling

tumbleweed completes the peaceful, serene picture. The traveller is then distracted from the "pots of gold" by a news broadcast reporting a night of air strikes in Cambodia, a report that invokes images in his mind of student protests.

As all of the poems discussed so far suggest, nature plays a significant role in Ginsberg's life on the road, constantly alleviating an overwhelming fear that America has fallen beyond redemption. One would thus suspect that the bucolic setting of a commune would serve as an ideal refuge for a poet burdened by the nation's problems. Appearing at the climax of section four and near the end of the volume, "Ecologue" documents a small portion of Ginsberg's life at Cherry Valley, during the autumn of 1970. In August, 1968, the poet's non-profit organization, The Committee on Poetry, purchased a ninety-acre farm near Woodstock. "Surrounded by woods and with a creek running through the property, the farm had an idyllic charm" that Ginsberg hoped would help him escape, however briefly, the pressures of his highly public life (Schumacher 571).

Yet, as "Ecologue" demonstrates, the farm did not quite live up to the poet's expectations, for it could not keep him from worrying about the ongoing sociopolitical strife in America: "his recounting of various happenings on the idyllic farm is interrupted by reminders of the harsh realities of war, political protests, poverty, and

ecological concerns" (Johnson 40). The poem contrasts the inner peace Ginsberg sometimes feels in the seclusion of the farm with his fears and paranoias. He thinks constantly about the millions suffering in New York City, about friends and acquaintances being harassed and persecuted by the police and the courts, and the continuing escalation of the Vietnam War. Early in the poem, for example, we see Ginsberg enjoying the tranquillity of his natural surroundings:

Some nights in sleeping bag
 Cricket zinging networks dewy meadows,
 white stars sparkle across black sky,
 falling asleep I listen & watch
 till eyes close, and wake silent—
 at 4 AM the whole sky's moved,
 a Crescent moon lamps up the woods.

& last week one Chill night
 summer disappeared—
 little apples in old trees red,
 tomatoes red & green on vines,
 green squash huge under leafspread,
 corn thick in light green husks,
 sleepingbag wet with dawn dews
 & that one tree red at woods' edge!

(149)

Like Wordsworth's walking tour in "Tintern Abbey," Ginsberg's journey here is in part psychological: the memory of nights under the stars shelters the poet from "the din / Of towns and cities" (Wordsworth, *Poetical Works* 164, lines 25-26). As the memory becomes more vivid and detailed, Ginsberg begins to recall the recent bountiful harvest and a crisp autumn dawn. Together, the two stanzas chronicle the

the startled and confused mind of one who has been awakened abruptly from an uneasy sleep. Ginsberg first tries to recall if he had a nightmare, and then takes stock of his physiological condition, noting his heightened state of awareness. The series of unanswered questions that completes the stanza manifests the poet's growing anxiety, an obsessive preoccupation with his personal security and privacy. Two hours later, Ginsberg is again awake and intensely alert, all senses focused on a mechanical sound he cannot identify. Dismissing the machinery of the farm as a possible source, the poet begins to fear that the hum may originate in unpleasant or, finally, even menacing forces.

In one sense, the police have indeed descended upon Cherry Valley, as has the rest of Ginsberg's troubled America. Despite the physical isolation of the poet, despite his active pursuit of a Thoreauvian lifestyle, the personal baggage that he bears ultimately taints his view of his idyllic surroundings. "Ecologue" concludes as it opens, with Ginsberg offering his impressions of the farm. By this point, however, the poet can only see the failure and ugliness in it: the damaged and abandoned crops, a polluted creek, a leaky toilet, and a garbage pail full of disposable bottles and cans. The farm that brought Ginsberg peace of mind at the beginning of the poem is, by its end, little more than a microcosm of a deeply troubled nation, a nation

that is "breaking down" (160).¹²⁷

"I will haunt these States," Ginsberg vows, "with beard bald head / eyes staring out plane window, / hair hanging in Greyhound bus midnight" (46). In part, the statement testifies to his role as poet-anarchist, as a writer that presides over his society with a watchful and often condemning eye. And indeed, in this respect, the poet's vow is borne out by the art itself. *The Fall of America* is in part an arraignment of a nation that is destroying its natural beauty with industrial pollution and ploughing through its youth to fight a war that, by the late sixties, the majority of its citizens could no longer support. But more than a document of protest, the poem is a record of a mind that strives fully to inhabit America during one of its most turbulent periods. Speaking of his poetic method, Ginsberg once claimed that his aim as a writer was to capture "the sequence of thought-forms passing naturally through ordinary mind" (*Collected Poems* xx). As a long poem in the tradition of *The Cantos* and *Paterson*, *The Fall of America* is the most extensive and, perhaps, the finest example of the poet's technique in practice.

* * *

¹²⁷ Interestingly, Ginsberg dates the second section of the poem simply "Fall 1970," making "Ecologue" the only piece in the volume dated with a season, rather than with a specific month.

Allen Ginsberg has dedicated his career to promoting the work of key Modernist poets—especially that of Pound, Williams, and Olson, whose struggles to create personal forms Ginsberg believes were indispensable to the development of contemporary American poetry. Many other poets in the aftermath of World War II share his enthusiasm. For Ginsberg and his contemporaries—poets like Robert Duncan and Gary Snyder—the craft of poetry involves not shaping one's ideas and impressions into sonnets, quatrains, or ballads, but "making the moment conscious ... finding words to searchlight the moment" (*Santa Barbara News & Review* 28). In an effort to demonstrate even more clearly how extensively Pound, Williams, and Olson influenced the development of contemporary American writing, I now turn to examine briefly the work of five additional poets of the fifties and sixties, poets who drew especially on Williams' theory of "Relative Measure" in order to create their own theories of compositional immediacy.

POSTSCRIPT

"OPENING THE FIELD": CONTINUITIES AND VARIATIONS¹²⁸

Major works of twentieth-century art are probes of consciousness—particular experiments with recollection or mindfulness, experiments with language and speech, experiments with forms.

(Ginsberg, "Meditation and Poetics" 147)

Pound, Williams, and Olson developed their theories of art out of a need to express "the thoughts and speech of a living world" (Williams, "Measure" 132). Inspired to varying degrees by these revolutionary manifestoes, poets in the aftermath of World War II continued to explore ways of representing personal experience in art. While one could undoubtedly point to many differences between modern and contemporary poets in terms of method, one can also uncover enough common ground between them to indicate a sense of continuity in the development of a major field within twentieth-century American poetry. Several authors now routinely associated with the Black Mountain school, for example, have professed their indebtedness not just to Olson's creative theory, but to Pound's and Williams' as well: the instances of Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, and

¹²⁸ The quotation is a paraphrase of Duncan's title *The Opening of the Field* (1960).

Paul Blackburn are surely salient in this regard.

Paul Blackburn's association with the Black Mountain school was in a capacity somewhat different than that of student or instructor. Indeed, he never taught at that school, nor did he even visit it until well after its closing.¹²⁹ During a visit with Pound at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in 1951, Blackburn was encouraged to "write Creeley, chicken farmer up in New Hampshire" (Dembo 134). Blackburn subsequently initiated a correspondence that drew him into the circle of Black Mountain poets, and it was through those connections that he became New York editor and distributor of the first issue of the *Black Mountain Review*.

Like Ginsberg, Blackburn was cognizant of the preference among postwar American poets for open and organic forms:

What goes into the poem, especially in the last ten years, is very much a matter of speech rhythms and of natural, rather than forced rhythms.... It started ... with Olson, Creeley, Corman, myself and then the people at Black Mountain picked it up, and apparently the movement came to some sort of explosion with

¹²⁹ As Edith Jarolim recalls, Blackburn was "fond of telling the story of how he made a trip to the site of the North Carolina school about ten years after it closed so he could finally reply to the frequent inquiries, yes, I was at Black Mountain" (26).

the San Francisco Renaissance. An awful lot of people who came out of that—the so-called Beat poets—are writing very much with speech rhythms; but tremendously long lines and tremendously powerful lines in terms of the build-up of the emotions of the poem.

(cited from Ossman 24)

In this 1963 interview, Blackburn praises the trend toward metrical irregularity in postwar American verse, a trend originating, he seems to suggest, in poets influenced by Williams' theory of "Relative Measure." Blackburn himself uses punctuation and spacing to duplicate patterns of thought and speech, creating poems that, in his words, often have "no obvious structure[s] whatsoever—in terms of what is conventionally thought of as form"—but which are often "more highly charged" with the energies of the compositional act than are poems written in deference to inherited formulations (24).¹³⁰

What Blackburn describes as the metrical irregularity of contemporary verse Denise Levertov chooses to call

¹³⁰ Echoing Olson, Creeley, and Ginsberg, Blackburn insists in another interview that, in contemporary American poetry, "each poem has to find its own form" (Norton and O'Connell 12). In this interview (1970), Blackburn credits Pound with enlightening him on what could be done with the poetic line: "In college I began to read Ezra Pound. His *Personae*, not to mention the *Cantos*, was an incredible revelation to me as to what you could do in terms of making music with different line lengths, and how rhythm could be so rich and varied" (11).

"organic form." One of the chief practitioners of field composition, Levertov has also acknowledged "the stylistic influence of William Carlos Williams" on her writing (cited from Allen and Butterick 410), as well as having explicitly cited such landmark volumes as *ABC of Reading*, *Guide to Kulchur*, and *Literary Essays* among the most significant "aid[s]" to her "craft" (Levertov, *Poet in the World* 250).¹³¹ Like Ginsberg, Levertov corresponded with Williams early in her career. She also visited him regularly for some years, during which visits the two engaged in lengthy discussions of poetry. After reading her early work—poems from *The Double Image* (1946)—Williams offered Levertov the same advice that he gave Ginsberg in 1950: to strive for greater clarity and directness of presentation.¹³²

Levertov's poetic method, outlined in her essay "Some Notes on Organic Form" (1965), however, issues not merely from the theory she learned from Williams. Organic poetry,

¹³¹ Shortly after emigrating to America, Levertov met Creeley and Olson, and read "Projective Verse." Along with the work of Williams and Pound, Olson's essay was crucial to the development of her theory of organic poetry.

¹³² Levertov later claimed that she appreciated that advice, and took as influence from Williams his "sharp eye for the material world" and his "keen ear for the vernacular" (*Poet in the World* 67). For his part, Williams felt a special connection to Levertov as a writer, for he claimed in a 1961 interview that her "sense of metrical arrangement" made him feel "closer to her than to any of the modern poets" (Williams, *Interviews* 40).

Leverlov explains, is the reflection in language and form of the emotional energy that drives the creative occasion: "In organic poetry the metric movement, the measure, is the direct expression of the movement of perception. And the sounds, acting together with the measure, are a kind of extended onomatopoeia—i.e., they imitate not the sounds of an experience ... but the feeling of an experience, its emotional tone, its texture" (*Poet in the World* 11). While the substance of this statement invites comparison with Williams' theory of "Relative Measure," it seems more directly related to Olson's principle of field composition; and her preference for forms reflective of the poet's emotional energy, to Pound's Imagism. Leverlov does not impose a predetermined scheme upon her poems (she does not, for example, "chop" her thoughts and impressions into "iamb"), but works to develop a precise correspondence between the rhythm of the line and "the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed" (Pound, *Literary Essays* 6). And she insists, echoing Olson and Creeley, that such a correspondence can only be found in the act itself of writing: "content and form are in a state of dynamic interaction; the understanding of whether an experience is a linear sequence or a constellation raying out from and into a central focus or axis ... is discoverable only in the

work, not before it" (Levertov, *Poet in the World* 9).¹³³

In "Advent 1966," perhaps Levertov's finest anti-Vietnam War piece, the poetic line "is expressive of the patterns of seeing" and feeling that inspired the poem's creation (cited from Estess 161):

Because in Vietnam the vision of a Burning Babe
is multiplied, multiplied,

the flesh on fire
not Christ's, as Southwell saw it, prefiguring
the Passion upon the Eve of Christmas,

but wholly human and repeated, repeated,
infant after infant, their names forgotten,
their sex unknown in the ashes,
set alight, flaming but not vanishing,
not vanishing as his vision but lingering,

cinders upon the earth or living on
moaning and stinking in hospitals three abed;

because of this my strong sight,
my clear caressive sight, my poet's sight I was given
that it might stir me to song,
is blurred.

There is a cataract filming over
my inner eyes. Or else a monstrous insect
has entered my head, and looks out
from my sockets with multiple vision,

seeing not the unique Holy Infant
burning sublimely, an imagination of redemption,
furnace in which souls are wrought into new life,
but, as off a beltline, more, more senseless figures
aflame.

And this insect (who is not there—
it is my own eyes do my seeing, the insect
is not there, what I see is there)

¹³³ In this essay, Levertov also echoes the second tenet of "Projective Verse": "Form," she avers, "is never more than a revelation of content" (13). See also her "A Testament and a Postscript 1959-1973," in which she professes that "content determines form, and yet that content is discovered only *in form*" (*Poet in the World* 3).

will not permit me to look elsewhere,
 or if I look, to see except dulled and unfocused
 the delicate, firm, whole flesh of the still unburned.

(*Poems* 124)

The piece opens with an allusion to the sixteenth-century poet Robert Southwell's "The Burning Babe," which chronicles what Levertov calls here a vision of "redemption." Yet, it is not Southwell's poem that stirs her to song. Haunted by television images of children crisped by napalm, Levertov feels mired in the cruelty of the war, as though, in her words, "a monstrous insect / has entered [her] head, and looks out / from [her] sockets with multiple vision." And the movement of the line reflects these patterns of seeing and feeling; form *reveals* meaning. Levertov uses repetition to figure her impaired poetic vision, her inability to escape the barbaric images of "senseless figures aflame." Her vision figures Advent not as a time of hope (as it does in Southwell's poem), but of stagnancy and death. The poem goes nowhere—neither rhythmically nor conceptually—beyond the hell that politicians and soldiers have made, and that journalists daily barraged the American public with in the late sixties. A very moving poem and a powerful example of organic verse, "Advent 1966" thus captures what Altieri calls "the energies of the attentive consciousness open to the event" (*Enlarging the Temple* 227).

This philosophy of remaining open to the event during

the act of writing was held, of course, by many writers who knew and admired Charles Olson. One of the most notable of these was Robert Duncan, a good friend of Levertov's for many years. Duncan first wrote to Levertov in 1952, praising in her work "a great effort, straining, breaking up all the melodic line" (cited from Levertov, "Some Duncan Letters" 91). From 1955 to 1972, Duncan and Levertov corresponded on a regular basis, sharing their views on poetry and their opinions on each other's work.¹³⁴ Levertov has expressed her gratitude for this friendship, proudly declaring that it was "an extremely important factor in the development of [her] consciousness as a poet" (94). For his part, Duncan has acknowledged Levertov's strong influence both on his theory and on his "immediate concerns in living" (*A Selected Prose* 36).

In what is perhaps his most important statement on poetics, "Towards an Open Universe" (1965), Duncan postulates that the individual is an inherent part of a complex order, of a constantly changing universe: "We are, all the many expressions of living matter, grandchildren of Gaia, Earth, and Uranus, the Heavens.... The sea was our

¹³⁴ The informed reader will also be aware that the correspondence terminated in 1972 because of a rift in the friendship that developed over Duncan's misunderstanding of one of Levertov's antiwar poems. Both poets have discussed this painful severing of ties, Levertov in her "Some Duncan Letters," and Duncan in his interview with Michael André-Bernstein and Burton Hatlen.

first mother and the sun our father.... Tide-flow under the sun and moon of the sea, systole and diastole of the heart, these rhythms lie deep in our experience" ("Open Universe" 134). Duncan does not conceive of humanity as distinct (or even separable) from other forms of life in the universe, for our ways of seeing, thinking, being, he believes, are governed by the elemental rhythms that are the very fibre of existence: "In the very beginnings of life," Duncan claims, "in the source of our cadences, with the first pulse of the blood in the egg then, the changes of night and day must have been there" (134).

In Duncan's view, it is the poet's responsibility to capture this cosmic harmony in art: "the poem might follow the primary processes of thought and feeling, the immediate impulse of psychic life," so that "our consciousness, and the poem as a supreme effort of consciousness, comes in a dancing organization between personal and cosmic identity" (135). It goes without saying, then, that in such a view a poem's form should not be determined prior to the act of writing. Echoing Williams' 'boxed-crab' analogy, Duncan classifies conventional form as "just what can be imposed," formulations alien to "the natural order," "the beauty of the universe itself" (139, 136). "To be alive," Duncan argues, "is a form involving organization in time and space, continuity and body, that exceeds clearly [any such] conscious design" (139). The poet can best express that

organization, the natural order of being, by creating "a force fit for the complex of impression, perception, information, emotion, apprehension, in which the impetus and intent of the work arises" (*A Selected Prose* 91).¹³⁵

Obviously, the Black Mountain poets are not the only writers responsible for opening the field of contemporary poetry and poetics. As the work of Gary Snyder clearly shows, there are other and different types of 'openings.' Like Duncan, Snyder uses art as a vehicle to reveal the "natural order" of the universe, the interplay of cosmic and psychic rhythms.¹³⁶ Although he has led a relatively reclusive life in the Sierra Nevada since 1968, Snyder is often associated with the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance because he participated in the Six Gallery reading, and because of his friendships with Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, and Philip Whalen—three other poets who took part in that memorable event. Snyder shares with these writers a deep respect for Williams' work, a respect that developed during the elder poet's visit to Reed College in

¹³⁵ Duncan, like Pound, was not hostile toward tradition per se, but toward the arbitrary use of conventional forms in contemporary art. Quoting Duncan, Christopher Beach argues that the poet's "continual search for artistic 'openness' is largely a reaction to the dominant poetic mode of the post-war era in which ... the poem was seen 'as a discipline and a form into which the poet put ideas and feelings, confining them to a literary propriety'" (12).

¹³⁶ In a 1972 interview with Nathaniel Tarn, Snyder claims that Duncan is currently his favourite poet (Tarn 111).

the early fifties.¹³⁷

Like Williams and Pound, Snyder believes that the poet can most effectively represent his/her experience not in prefabricated forms, but through "the skilled and inspired use of the voice and language to embody rare and powerful states of mind" (Snyder, *Earth House Hold* 117). "A kind of intensity can indeed be produced," Snyder admits, by "inventing an abstract structure and then finding things in experience which can be forced into it." But he insists that any such intensity would be gained by "straining and sweating against self-imposed bonds" (cited from Berg 357). Snyder prefers a more natural discipline in writing, forms that "follow the rhythm of the ... life [he is] leading at any given time" (cited from Allen 420).

Influenced by Amerindian folklore and Zen, Snyder perceives the world as a vast network of interdependent creatures; for Snyder, nature is a primary force in which he "grasps the essence of life and sees parts of himself" (Mao 129). As a poet, then, Snyder strives to register the

¹³⁷ While Snyder was quite taken with Williams' work, his favourite poet during his years at Reed College was Pound, whose Imagist poetry particularly fascinated the young poet. This interest is evident in much of Snyder's work, as Jody Norton argues: Snyder typically records experience in "concrete images," in poems that "sheer away from abstractions" (42). See also Snyder's interview with John Jacoby, in which the poet claims that he was influenced by Pound's preference for "the melodic phrase" over "some formal metric stanza pattern that belongs to the past" (Snyder, *Real Work* 46).

correspondence he senses between himself and the 'field' in which he lives. He uses open form poetics in an attempt to "locate the self ecologically in its actions and interactions with its environment, to keep it anchored to its minute-by-minute manifestations in ... the physical world" (Kern, "Recipes, Catalogues" 188).

In a work like Snyder's "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout," for example, the movement of the line reflects the poet's struggle to affirm the self as an inherent part of a dynamic landscape, a wondrous and pristine wilderness:

Down valley a smoke haze
Three days heat, after five days rain
Pitch glows on the fir-cones
Across rocks and meadows
Swarms of new flies.

I cannot remember things I once read
A few friends, but they are in cities.
Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup
Looking down for miles
Through high still air.

(*Riprap* 3)

There is a correspondence expressed here between the landscape, carefully described in the first stanza, and the poet's state of mind, figured in the second. All that Snyder sees around him is in flux: the haze building in the summer heat after a long rain, and swarms of recently matured insects, all of these inundating the valley. Snyder's cataloguing technique helps to convey a sense of the interrelatedness of all elements in the surrounding

wilderness. In the first two lines of the second stanza, the poet's ruminations gesture to an attempt at self-negation. To the Zenist (we may recall from Chapter Four), books are purveyors of knowledge. In Snyder's poem, the knowledge that the poet has acquired from things he once read has momentarily been lost, enabling him to transcend the boundaries of rational thought, to see into the life of things. The poet also attempts to negate his identity by drawing attention to the distance separating him from his friends—an attempt that perhaps reminds us of Whalen's struggle to distance himself from his Oregon heritage in *Scenes of Life*. With "[a]ll the junk that goes with being human" now stripped away (8), the Snyder of *Riprap* comes to affirm his connections with his environment by drinking mountain water.

The poet, as Snyder suggests, may indeed produce a work of "intensity" by forcing the "things in experience" into predetermined or inherited formulations. But "by breaking away from an assertive, interfering approach toward ... artistic ... creation," he is better able to establish "a close and respectful response to what is going on outside and inside himself" (Cooley 48). Thus, Snyder insists, the poet will find the most effective means of representing his/her place in the world from within immediate experience: "Each poem grows from an energy-mind-field-dance, and has its own inner grain" (Berg 357).

Poets interested in racial issues (Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones, for example) have opened yet another field in contemporary American poetry. While Baraka shares with Snyder and Duncan the view that personal experience provides the poet with the most effective means to poetic form, he does not share their cosmological views. Baraka's ideology is founded upon the belief that the world is a place of conflict and division, not of harmony. An outspoken political activist since the fifties, Baraka is dedicated to the cause of combatting racism in the United States, and what he sees as the oppression of African Americans. In his most polemical writings, the poet urges black Americans to preserve their heritage, and to maintain a cultural identity independent of white America. One of the poet's early role models was somewhat inconsistent with these values and teachings, however. The poems of Baraka's first collection *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961) indicate the influence of Eliot, whose work represented to the young poet "an objective art of structured containment and tight aesthetic control" (Sollors 38).

Living in Greenwich Village in the late fifties, Baraka was also inspired by the bohemian literature and lifestyle of the Beats, and by the Black Mountain poets, many of whom had taken up residence in the village after the North Carolina college closed in 1956. In his capacity as editor for *Yugen* (1958-1962), he published work by Ginsberg,

Kerouac, McClure, Snyder, Frank O'Hara, and Joel Oppenheimer, among others. When Baraka edited "Projective Verse" for his Totem Press series (1959), he also began corresponding with Olson, establishing through his letters a friendship that lasted until 1965. Perhaps not surprisingly, Baraka in the early sixties found the work of his contemporaries more inspiring than Eliot's. Whereas the work of Ginsberg and Kerouac, for example, nurtured Baraka's desire to reflect the personal in art, the work of Eliot, "propagated by the New Critics," seemed "to separate literature from life" (Sollors 271).¹³⁸

As his poetics statement "How You Sound??" clearly shows, Baraka was also inspired by Williams during the late fifties and early sixties: "There must not be any preconceived notion or *design* for what the poem *ought* to be.... I'm not interested in writing sonnets, sestinas or anything ... only poems. If the poem has got to be a sonnet (unlikely tho) or whatever, it'll certainly let me know. The only 'recognizable tradition' a poet need follow is himself" (cited from Allen 424-25). The poet's attitude toward the sonnet invites a recollection of Williams' many

¹³⁸ In his defence of "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (1959), Baraka validates Kerouac's sketching method on the basis that it provides the author with a means of documenting his consciousness ("Letter to *Evergreen*" 352). See also Baraka's introduction to *The Moderns* (1963), in which he praises the highly personal nature of Kerouac's prose, and the fact that the author kept his own "rhythms and awkwardness ... as a part of [the] final story" (xvi).

essays denouncing that form as unsuitable for use in twentieth-century poetry.¹³⁹ Baraka believes that the only valid source of form for the contemporary poet is the creative energy of the individual, which manifests itself in its own distinct patterns. In a 1960 interview, Baraka praises Williams' efforts to use "the rhythms of [American] speech" as a measure for poetry, rather than "any kind of metrical concept" (Baraka, *Conversations* 6). Those efforts inspired Baraka to use "Black speech as a poetic reference" in the creation of an art justly reflective of the consciousness of an African American (Sollors 79). As the poet argues in "How You Sound??", "MY POETRY is whatever I think I am" (cited from Allen 424).¹⁴⁰

While it is patently impossible to achieve full comprehensiveness in any single study of postwar American poetics, one can at least work toward a demonstration (as I

¹³⁹ The statement itself is also rooted in Kerouac's theory, condensed in the dictum "Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image" (Kerouac, *Good Blonde* 70), which Baraka echoes here.

¹⁴⁰ One must be cautious when attempting to define Baraka's influences. As we may recall from Chapter Four, Baraka left Greenwich Village in 1965, with the belief that he was abandoning the white world. In his essays of the sixties, Baraka petitioned African American writers to be "missionaries of Blackness" (Chapman 482), to develop a literature written "from an orientation of black culture" (Hudson 44). While one might argue that this position does not necessarily deny the influence of autobiographical writers like Kerouac, Olson, and Williams, it would be imprudent at the same time not to acknowledge the role that race relations in the United States played in shaping Baraka's artistic theories during the sixties.

hope I have) of the numerous similarities between the methods of many contemporary poets, without being overly reductive or superficial in one's analysis. Although the poets mentioned in this study have led very separate lives since the fifties, many have gathered at schools, readings, lectures, and conferences over the last three decades to exchange ideas and provide their audiences with valuable insight into contemporary poetic craft.

In 1963, Creeley invited Ginsberg and Whalen to join himself, Olson, Duncan, and Levertov in teaching poetry at the University of British Columbia. Two years later, the University of California (at Berkeley) hosted a poetry conference that included Baraka, Creeley, Duncan, Ginsberg, Wieners, and Jack Spicer. The conference "went down in history as a showcase of the most important younger poets working in America at that time" (Miles 374). In the summer of 1974, Chögyam Trungpa, who founded the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, petitioned Ginsberg and Anne Waldman to form a school of poetry. The result of their collective endeavour was "The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics," a venue devoted solely to the development of "writing creation that reflects mind nature observed during composition time" (Ginsberg, Waldman, Brownstein 241). The school operated as a think-tank, bringing together many of the most important postwar American artists as teachers of contemporary craft: Ginsberg and Waldman, Creeley, Duncan,

McClure, Whalen, Ted Berrigan, Michael Brownstein, William Burroughs, John Cage, and Jackson MacLow. Although somewhat more infrequently, gatherings like the Berkeley Conference still occur. From 2 to 9 July 1994, the Naropa Institute celebrated its twentieth anniversary with a conference and tribute to Allen Ginsberg. The event, which featured a collection of "Beats and Other Rebel Angels," was a celebration of "the power of the living artist to bend the curve of culture" ("Beats" np).

It is this struggle "to bend the curve of culture" that has dominated postwar avant-garde poetry in America. For Beat and Black Mountain authors, and for poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, the simple fact of being a writer has meant questioning or reassessing the value of tradition and, in many cases, shunning conventional verse altogether. Emerson once said that the American poet "has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him" (*Collected Works* 3: 7). Although often scorned and ridiculed by the literary critics of their day, the writers considered in this study have realized Emerson's vision of the ideal American poet. Rather than rely on outmoded conventions, they have all struggled to create measures relevant to their time, measures formed, as Williams put it, "direct from the turmoil itself." As did Williams, Pound, and Olson before them, writers like Creeley and Ginsberg have generated useful and influential theories of poetic

immediacy in their time. Ultimately, it is to their credit and to the benefit of American letters that they have taken such active roles in educating new generations of authors, for their dedicated efforts have helped perpetuate an artistic view that, in the nineteenth century, helped define American literary culture.

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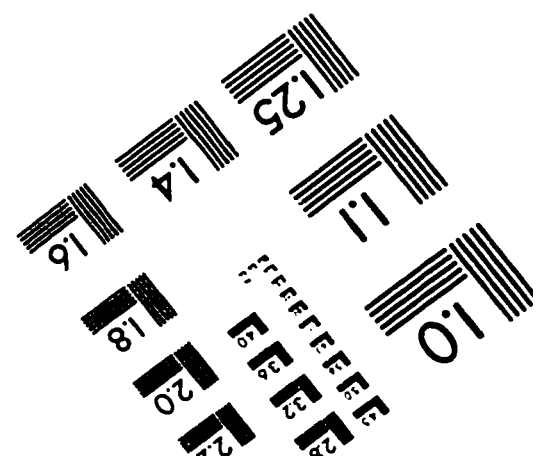
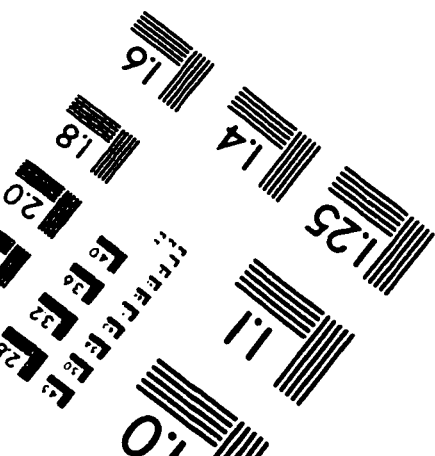
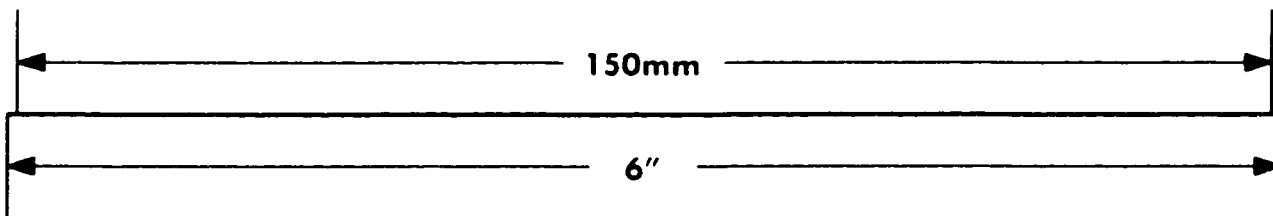
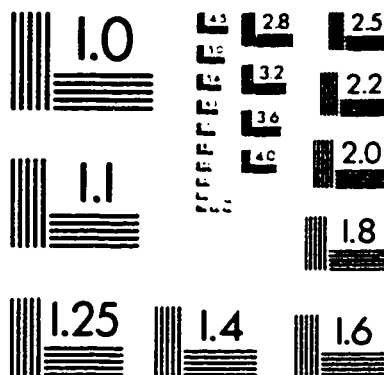
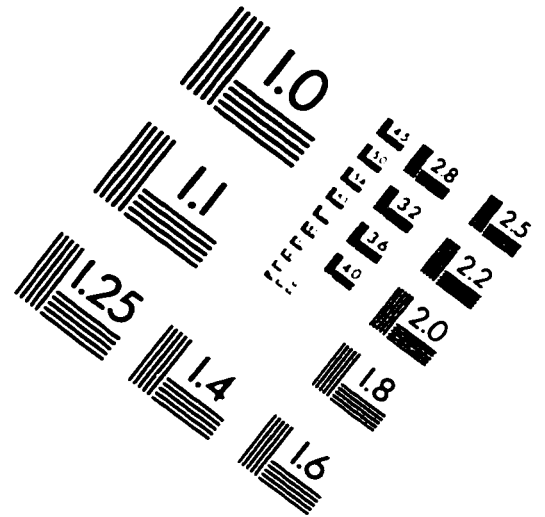
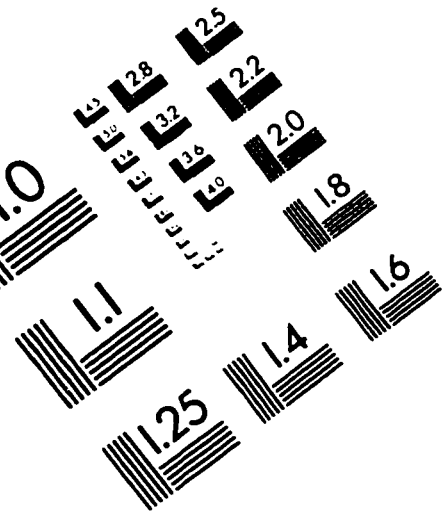
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