“It goes into a pocket pad in snatches, then is honed
& set into a fixd context in a journal, then is
typed & later typeset.... I sit in the morning sun,
sipping coffee, popping knuckles, whispering
these words out loud as I jot them down.”
Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics

*Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* promotes and pursues topics in the burgeoning field of 20th and 21st century poetics. Critical and scholarly work on poetry and poetics of interest to the series includes social location in its relationships to subjectivity, to the construction of authorship, to oeuvres, and to careers; poetic reception and dissemination (groups, movements, formations, institutions); the intersection of poetry and theory; questions about language, poetic authority, and the goals of writing; claims in poetics, impacts of social life, and the dynamics of the poetic career as these are staged and debated by poets and inside poems. Topics that are bibliographic, pedagogic, that concern the social field of poetry, and reflect on the history of poetry studies are valued as well. This series focuses both on individual poets and texts and on larger movements, poetic institutions, and questions about poetic authority, social identifications, and aesthetics.

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*Procedural Form in Postmodern American Poetry: Berrigan, Antin, Silliman, and Hejinian* By David W. Huntsperger
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Introduction: A Social Reading of Postmodern Poetic Form

In 1963, David Antin came to a realization: The cold war had changed the rules for writing poetry. That this revelation should come at this historical moment is no mere coincidence. In retrospect, the years 1958–1963 represent “a turning point in the Cold War,” a moment during which “the tensions which had been accumulating since the end of World War II sharpened and intensified through a series of crises that repeatedly appeared to bring the globe to the precipice of nuclear war” (Hershberg 303). The most significant of these crises was undoubtedly the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, an event that Antin has in mind when he describes his shift in poetic praxis. In the introduction to his Selected Poems: 1963–1973, he attempts to explain the experimental turn of his writing during this decade. “But why 1963–73?” he asks. His meandering answer is not so much about aesthetics as it is about the ideologies underpinning American capitalism and America’s cold war geopolitical strategy:

Because in the Fall of 1963 I had come back from spending a year and a half in a small town in upstate New York, where I had given up writing a particular novel and put behind me a way of writing poetry—a kind of image poetry that I was finding more decorative than meaningful and incapable of addressing the kinds of things that were coming insistently to my mind then.

What kinds of things?

Language and politics, as it seems from reading the poems that I went on to write then. They are of course not the same thing, but they are very close, because language is the cultural matrix in which
the value systems that determine politics are held. And I was thinking about that in the year and a half I spent living in North Branch, which was during the Cuban missile crisis. And I remember standing in a lawyer’s office with Charlie Summers, a decent old man who raised free ranging quality chickens and was losing business to the automated egg factories, where the animals lived out their wretched lives in tiny cages hooked up to food supplies and waste disposal units till their bones rotted and their little corpses were good for nothing more than Campbell soup, while their foul smelling excrement poisoned the local hillsides and streams. And Charlie was telling me about Khrushchev and Kennedy and the Cuban missiles and how if we were going to have it out we might as well have it out now, and I thought about schoolyards and bullies and challenges because that’s what Charlie had on his mind. But then I asked him how far Russia was from the United States, and he thought it was about 10,000 miles. And I asked how far North Branch was from New York City, and he said it was 135. So I asked him did he know what would happen if one of those Russian missiles aimed for New York City missed by a 1.35% error, and he didn’t. So I suggested that future Chinese military historians would speculate why North Branch had been a prime Russian target. And I realized I had to leave North Branch, go back to the city, and find a new way of working. (Antin, SP 13–14)

With socially irresponsible corporations pumping out pollution, the world’s superpowers engaged in a nuclear showdown, and average Americans buying into the ideology of the military-industrial complex, Antin’s early use of free-verse “image poetry” no longer seemed sufficient. He needed, as he puts it, “a new way of working.”

This “new way of working” is the subject of this book. The phrase is especially apt in its conflation of concepts. It suggests novelty, first of all. The postmodern American poets I will be discussing—Ted Berrigan, Antin, Ron Silliman, and Lyn Hejinian—all work in avant-garde or experimental modes. The phrase also suggests a self-conscious procedure, a predetermined “way” of going about literary production, and these four poets all used procedural methods of composition between the 1960s and the 1980s. Finally, the phrase suggests labor. A new mode of writing is also a new mode of “working,” a form of production within a postindustrial society. Of course, writing poetry involves a different kind of labor from welding or waiting tables or even programming computers. Artistic and literary production cannot simply be conflated with
other modes of production, whether white or blue collar. Yet literary production is still part of a social totality; it occurs within the same dominant political and ideological framework as every other form of labor. For this reason, literary works inevitably encode within themselves larger social, political, cultural, ideological, and economic conditions, either at the level of form or content, or both. History is always intrinsically in the work itself.

The forms of procedural poetry that I will be examining are unusually self-conscious and self-reflexive in their representation of literary labor and of the larger conditions of production within an era of American hegemony. Although every poetic form is an instantiation of the labor that produced it, the postmodern procedural poetry discussed in the following chapters makes intellectual labor—either implicitly or explicitly—the primary concern of the literary work. That labor should become a central formal and thematic issue in the poetry of the postindustrial era is not surprising, in light of larger shifts in production and consumption. From 1945 to 1989, a period symbolically bracketed by the end of World War II and the fall of the Berlin Wall, working conditions within the United States changed rapidly, and—in terms of political representation—not for the better. Technological advances altered the conditions of production, as Henry Heller points out in *The Cold War and the New Imperialism* (2006): “The introduction of robots, nuclear power, lasers, new strains of grains, insecticides, herbicides, preservatives, synthetic fabrics and plastics, jet aircraft, rockets, super tankers, transistors, and computers transformed the production and distribution of food and industrial goods” (107). But these technological advances did little for the workforce as a mass political entity. As the United States slowly outspent the Soviet Union on arms production and became the leader of the First World capitalist economy, labor itself became more invisible, more alienated in Marxist terms. One can trace this development through the steady decline of American unions. Between 1946 and 1980, union membership dropped from 35 percent to 20 percent of the nonagricultural workforce, and by 2004 the number had declined to approximately 13 percent (Cherney, Issel, and Taylor 1, 4). This general decline in union membership accompanied a decline in union influence, as organized labor—weakened by the McCarthyism of the postwar era—became less effective in its advocacy for social reform.

But McCarthyism alone does not explain the slow disappearance of a viable labor movement. The trend is also linked to changes in
the economy itself. The militant leftist unions of the 1930s and ’40s were, in part, created by the 1929 stock market crash and the ensuing depression. In times of economic hardship, the need for reform is evident. But following World War II, the United States, along with a number of other industrialized Western nations, experienced an economic boom. In this boom economy, the workforce gained enormous buying power as “historically unprecedented levels of growth created the foundations of a new mass consumer culture that emerged in North America and Western Europe” (Heller 105). The decline of American labor, then, corresponds to the rise of the American consumer. Economic prosperity continued to undercut populist activism in the 1960s, when the American New Left threatened to bring about major social changes. Ultimately, “the crisis of the 1960s” failed to become “a fundamental or revolutionary challenge to the established order in the United States” (179). This failure may be attributed in part to the strength of the economy: “[I]t should not be forgotten that the upheavals of the 1960s took place during a period of unprecedented economic prosperity. Revolutionary political parties seldom prosper during such periods” (180). In short, in the mid-1960s, the actual political power of the American working class was in the middle of a long, slow decline.

In the work of both Berrigan and Antin, one finds an implicit formal critique of the mid-century social shift from individual-as-laborer to individual-as-consumer. Ultimately, this shift is simply another form of exploitation. As Guy Debord explains in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), “alienated consumption becomes for the masses a duty in addition to alienated production” (40). But despite their willingness to foreground issues of literary labor and cultural production, neither Berrigan nor Antin undertakes a self-consciously Marxist critique of contemporary society. With Silliman and Hejinian, this changes. Both poets demonstrate obvious Marxist leanings in their procedural work, and it is perhaps not coincidental that both began to write in the 1970s, when the American economic boom came to an end. The economic downturn continued in the early 1980s, when Hejinian published the first version of *My Life* (1980) and Silliman published *Tjanting* (1981). Silliman’s procedural poem is overtly Marxist in its critique of class relations in the United States, and Hejinian’s autobiographical poem is clearly informed by a Marxian understanding of commodity fetishism (though, as I will argue later, her work is best understood as post-Marxist). The radical political positioning of Silliman’s and Hejinian’s respective poems can be
read, at least in part, as a response to the pressing economic problems of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In terms of politics, it is also significant that Hejinian and Silliman were living and writing in San Francisco in the 1970s. Like the other San Francisco Language poets, they were profoundly shaped by the American war in Vietnam. As Hejinian explains, “The coming together of the poets who are now associated with the Language school in the Bay Area began more or less coincidentally in the early 1970s, but all of us had been involved in some degree of political activism during the Vietnam War, and we came to poetry with political, or social, goals in mind” (Inquiry 171–172). For Americans, the Vietnam War was in many ways the hottest point of the cold war. In Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s estimation, the war was “the pinnacle” of American cold war imperialism (178). At the same time, the Vietnam War gave rise to the New Left and a renewed struggle for social justice within the United States:

Just when the United States was most deeply embroiled in an imperialist venture abroad, when it had strayed farthest from its original constitutional project, that constituent spirit bloomed most strongly at home—not only in the antiwar movements themselves, but also in the civil rights and Black Power movements, the student movements, and eventually the second-wave feminist movements. The emergence of the various components of the New Left was an enormous and powerful affirmation of the principle of constituent power and the declaration of the reopening of social spaces. (179)

The influence of the Black Power movement, the antiwar movement, and second-wave feminism on American poetry from the 1960s to the 1980s is readily apparent. One need only open an anthology to find Gwendolyn Brooks and Amiri Baraka engaging with the politics of Black Nationalism, or Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov protesting the Vietnam War, or Adrienne Rich and Susan Howe reclaiming and revising the role of women in literary history. But labor is a trickier concept. In poetry, as in society, it is often unnoticed, unrepresented, or ignored. Yet what is invisible at the level of subject matter reappears at the level of form, especially in the case of postmodern American procedural poetry, in which the method of writing is constantly in the foreground. Thus, it is to the subjects of form and formalist criticism that I will now turn.
Form and Culture

Formalist criticism has a bad reputation. Within the field of literary and cultural studies, it is widely reputed to be ahistorical and ideologically suspect. Robert Kaufman links this critical antipathy to formalism to a rejection of Kantian aesthetics: “‘Kantian aesthetics’ has been mapped onto, been seen to generate, or simply been made coterminous with that baleful phenomenon, formalism,” which is often criticized for its “ostensible allegiance” to bourgeois class interests (131). Kaufman summarizes the “post-Marxist” critique of formalist ideology as follows:

At a foundational moment for modern-bourgeois, desocialized “representationalist” ideologies of aesthetics, ethics, and politics, Kant’s third Critique and the art contemporaneous with it establish an essentialist or transcendental theory of cultural value, a theory based in literary or aesthetic form. This theory’s other, from Romanticism through the twentieth century, is the material, the social, and the historical, all of which are erased by or made subservient to artistic-philosophical form. Thus emergent aesthetic formalism ideologically deforms material, sociohistorical reality, turning it first into art and then into art theory. (131–132)

But as Kaufman goes on to demonstrate, the opposition between formalist criticism and “the material, the social, and the historical” is far from absolute. Though formalist reading strategies can be used to evade social and historical considerations, they can also be used to illuminate significant aspects of “sociohistorical reality.” As Susan J. Wolfson explains, “[A]ttention to form can articulate issues often felt to be inimical: not only the factitiousness of organic coherence, closed designs, and cognitive totality, but also the construction of forms in relation to subjectivity, cultural ideology, and social circumstance” (Formal 19). For the Marxian critic in particular, the study of literary form leads to the consideration of larger social issues. Far from an escape into ahistorical aesthetic minutiae, a socially aware formalist reading can illuminate the historical conditions under which a given literary artifact was produced. But for formalist criticism to be a heuristic device in the service of sociohistorical critique, the critic must actively read the social totality back into the form. To get from scanning lines of verse and noting rhyme schemes to revealing the conditions of production encoded within the form itself requires mediation.
In The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (1981), Fredric Jameson outlines a theory of mediation that reunites aesthetic forms with the social conditions that produce them. Jameson defines mediation as “the classical dialectical term for the establishment of relationships between, say, the formal analysis of a work of art and its social ground, or between the internal dynamics of the political state and its economic base” (39). Jameson explains that “the concept of mediation has traditionally been the way in which dialectical philosophy and Marxism itself have formulated their vocation to break out of the specialized compartments of the (bourgeois) disciplines and to make connections among the seemingly disparate phenomena of social life generally” (40). The critical practice that makes these connections apparent is, in Jameson’s analysis, “transcoding”:

If a more modern characterization of mediation is wanted, we will say that this operation is understood as a process of transcoding: as the invention of a set of terms, the strategic choice of a particular code or language, such that the same terminology can be used to analyze and articulate two quite distinct types of objects or “texts,” or two very different structural levels of reality. Mediations are thus a device of the analyst, whereby the fragmentation and autonomization, the compartmentalization and specialization of the various regions of social life (the separation, in other words, of the ideological from the political, the religious from the economic, the gap between daily life and the practice of the academic disciplines) is at least locally overcome, on the occasion of a particular analysis. Such momentary reunification would remain purely symbolic, a mere methodological fiction, were it not understood that social life is in its fundamental reality one and indivisible, a seamless web, a single inconceivable and transindividual process, in which there is no need to invent ways of linking language events and social upheavals or economic contradictions because on that level they were never separate from one another. (40)

Transcoding, then, allows the critic to analyze social phenomena via cultural artifacts. But as Jameson points out, the connections made by the critic are not merely arbitrary, and the mediation that transcoding enables is not “purely symbolic” or “a mere methodological fiction.” The critic is not constructing some sort of allegory machine that turns literary artifacts into social signifiers or social facts into literary texts. To
the contrary, transcoding reveals connections; it does not create them out of the blue. In this book, the “particular code or language” that I will use to mediate between postindustrial American society and postmodern poetry is a Marxist analysis of labor. And as we will see, this transcoding operation does not require unjustified methodological leaps. For the similarities and connections between the production of poetry and the larger conditions of production are readily apparent in the light of formal analysis.

The operation of mediation—of transcoding—between different levels of social life is, as Jameson points out, a function of critical analysis. That is, it is an externally motivated intervention into the “seamless web” of social life, but it is based on the assumption that the critical connections to be made in some way preexist the interpretive device. To adequately theorize this critical praxis of transcoding, another metaphor will be useful. The “seamless web” of social life may also be conceptualized as a collective “structure of consciousness,” in Georg Lukács’s formulation. Discussing “the ceaselessly revolutionary techniques of modern production,” Lukács finds that “the behaviour of the worker vis-à-vis the machine he serves and observes” is also evident in other social realms (History 97–98). In a capitalist society, the mode of thinking generated by the conditions of production permeate social life as a whole. “The distinction between a worker faced with a particular machine, the entrepreneur faced with a given type of mechanical development, the technologist faced with the state of science and the profitability of its application to technology, is purely quantitative; it does not directly entail any qualitative difference in the structure of consciousness” (98). In the course of this book, I will argue that the “structure of consciousness” associated with conditions of production also permeates social life at the cultural level. Poetry, too, emerges from the generalized structure of consciousness, whether in reaction, emulation, or both. The critic may find evidence of this structure of consciousness (or its repudiation) in the subject matter of poetry, but it is particularly revealing to explore consciousness at the formal level. Poetic form itself might be called a particular structure of consciousness. As such, it necessarily develops in relationship to larger social conditions. As Terry Eagleton explains, form “crystallizes out of certain dominant ideological structures” (26). Literary forms will necessarily bear evidence of these dominant structures. They will encode elements of a social totality within themselves, and it will require a process of transcoding to once again make these elements explicit.
In *Marxism and Form* (1971), Jameson offers a particularly precise theorization of the relationship between aesthetic forms and the social totality. He explains that

for Marxism the adequation of object to subject or of form to content can exist as an imaginative possibility only where in some way or another it has been concretely realized in social life itself, so that formal realizations, as well as formal defects, are taken as the signs of some deeper corresponding social and historical configuration which it is the task of criticism to explore. (331)

In other words, literary forms always have sociohistorical significance. This is not to say that forms passively reflect society, in the manner of Stendhal’s novelistic “mirror” walking itself down the road, reflecting in turns “the blue of the heavens” and “the mud of the quagmires.” But they do show evidence of having been produced by and within a particular culture, like any commodity. And yet literary forms, in Jameson’s thinking, are not wholly commodities, either. The literary artifact is produced; it is formed and informed by various cultural and economic pressures; but it is not consumed in the same way that, for example, an airport novel or a television program is consumed. Unlike the formal manifestations of the culture industry, literary forms frequently complicate or even undermine the absorption of content. According to Jameson, “the profound vocation of the work of art in a commodity society” is “not to be a commodity, not to be consumed, to be unpleasurable in the commodity sense” (Form 395). Thus, to the extent that a literary form fulfills its “profound vocation,” it maintains a kind of oppositional status within capitalist culture, even as it remains a product of that culture. It is both a manifestation and a critique of the culture within which it is produced. This is a particularly significant point to make with regard to postmodern American poetry, which often instantiates opposition to postindustrial capitalist culture. If the procedural forms treated in this book serve as a particular manifestation or concretization of the conditions of production within a society, they simultaneously function as a critique of these conditions.

A Marxian reading praxis constitutes one part of the critical framework I will employ in this book. But it is also necessary to apply the Marxist theory of form specifically to postmodern American poetry, and in doing so it will be useful to review some of the sociohistorical
criticism already generated in the field of avant-garde or experimental American poetry. In *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word* (1997), Michael Davidson sets out to offer “a materialist reading of modern poetry” using the notion of a “palimtext,” which “describes modern writing’s intertextual and material character, its graphic rendering of multiple layers of signification” and also “suggests the need for a historicist perspective in which textual layers refer not only to previous texts but to the discursive frame of the present in which they are seen” (8). Like an analysis based on transcoding, Davidson’s palimtextual reading strategy treats texts as complex, multilayered artifacts rich in historical significance. However, the focus is primarily on the text in its various manifestations, and not on the relationship between text and social totality. For Davidson, palimtextual reading proceeds from the fact that poems exist simultaneously in different semiotic systems: “A palimtextual study of modern writing must investigate the interstices of the material word in its multiple forms as visible page, poetics, sign system, and archive” (10). The present study will attempt a different intervention by focusing on the relationship of the text to the larger conditions of production that characterize postindustrial society. Yet it is worth noticing here Davidson’s notion of “the ideology of form,” which is particularly germane to my project. Discussing the influence of Louis Zukofsky on Jackson Mac Low, Robert Creeley, and Language poetry, Davidson suggests that these poets understand “the ideology of form—the idea that formal procedures derive from and generate critical frames” (133). This notion is a useful correction to the Marxist tendency to place ideological insight solely in the hands of the critic. The mediation between social life and cultural artifacts revealed by the critic is first articulated by the poet. And as we will see, the poets discussed in this book were to varying degrees aware of the critical possibilities inherent in procedural form.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis also explores poetry’s potential to construct interpretive frameworks. In *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (1990), she is particularly concerned with the relationship between gender and poetic practice. She theorizes a “female aesthetic” that is inherently oppositional:

To define then. “Female aesthetic”: the production of formal, epistemological, and thematic strategies by members of the group Woman, strategies born in struggle with much of already existing culture, and overdetermined by two elements of sexual difference—by women’s
psychosocial experiences of gender asymmetry and by women’s historical status in an (ambiguously) nonhegemonic group. (5)

This female aesthetic, which registers at the level of form, is also aligned with avant-garde praxis: “The anti-authoritarian ethics occurs on the level of structure. We call all this ‘new’ (‘new form,’ ‘new book,’ ‘new way of writing’ . . . ), that use of the word ‘new’ which, for centuries, has signaled antithesis to dominant values” (9). The gender of the poet is to varying degrees legible in the form of the poetry. This will become especially evident in my discussion of Hejinian’s *My Life*, a work that requires attention to the relationship between procedural form and gender identity. For DuPlessis, the connection between postmodern procedural form and a feminist writing practice is hardly accidental. She argues that “[a] list of the characteristics of postmodernism would be a list of the traits of women’s writing,” one of which is “a fascination with process” (17). Procedural form, then, may be considered particularly apt for the presentation of a feminist critical framework.

In *Genders, Races and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908–1934* (2001), DuPlessis expands her feminist paradigm to consider more broadly the ways in which poetic form mediates culture. In constructing a socially informed critical framework, DuPlessis attempts “both to contextualize poems and to mediate between their historical and social dimensions and their textual specificity, so that a critical, culturalist reading attends to the detail and can analyze dissonances, slippages, affirmations, and quirks within a range of verbal acts from discourses and semantic layering to the phoneme” (*Cultures* 7). She accomplishes this task using a reading strategy that she denominates “social philology,” which may be briefly defined as “an application of the techniques of close reading to reveal social discourses, subjectivities negotiated, and ideological debates in a poetic text” (12). Though DuPlessis is not primarily concerned with issues of labor, her notion of “social philology” serves as a valuable critical model for my own project.

Carrie Noland has also contributed to the groundwork of the present study by investigating the relationship between technology and poetic form. With French lyric poetry as her archive in *Lyric Aesthetics and the Challenge of Technology* (1999), Noland argues that “in the postmodern cultural environment,” “poetry mediates technological processes and, in turn, is increasingly subject to their mediation” (6). Moreover, she postulates “the existence of extensive ties, both practical and epistemological, linking capitalist expansion and its corollaries, modern industrialization
and electronic information processing, to poetic forms of subjective expression” (7). This argument—that cultural and epistemological developments are related to the state of industrial technology—is similar to Lukács’s theory of a qualitatively uniform structure of consciousness. However, Noland offers an important cautionary note to this particular line of thinking. The fact that a particular structure of consciousness may be postulated at a given moment in social development does not mean that poetry will passively display this mode of thinking: “It would be historically inaccurate and theoretically obtuse to insist that poems reflect technological innovations in any direct or predictable manner,” Noland explains (7). One need only consider the variety of formal practices that constitute postmodern poetry to see the truth of this statement. While procedural poetry encodes the labor process in a particularly self-conscious manner, there are plenty of postmodern poems that do not. Theoretically, the critic should be able to draw connections between a given poem or poetic form and any other aspect of contemporaneous social life. But in practice, some connections are going to be more valuable than others. Not all postmodern poetry lends itself to a useful comparison with larger issues of postindustrial labor. But this only becomes apparent with close attention to the poetry itself. As Noland points out, one cannot predict poetic strategies based solely on a given state of technological (or social) development. To get to sociohistorical critique, one must still begin by analyzing the poem.

Though formal innovation does not lead to cultural critique in any predictable way, the former does lend itself to the latter. In The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics (2003), Barrett Watten discusses the complex relationship between avant-garde poetic forms and broader cultural developments in an attempt to “address the gap between constructivist aesthetics and a larger cultural poetics” (xv). He defines “constructivist aesthetics” as “the imperative in radical literature and art to foreground their formal construction,” and he suggests that both poetry and criticism inevitably register the sociohistorical conditions within which they are produced: “Poetry, like criticism, internalizes social and historical reflexivity within an artistic medium; while criticism, like poetry, is motivated by particular social and historical determinants, as it structures itself within them” (xv, xviii). I would argue that any cultural artifact will be “motivated by particular social and historical determinants,” but Watten finds special value in “radical” works: “Radical literature and art can be seen as precisely a site for the unveiling of what eludes representation, and the forms of that perception
may become models for action as well” (xxii). Or, in a slightly different formulation, “radical art” attempts “to lay bare the device of its construction” (xxiii). Here again, I would argue that in practice critical attention to form will always result in an “unveiling of what eludes representation” or a laying bare of the construction of a work. But as Watten’s argument suggests, some cultural artifacts actively initiate this process. As we will see, the procedural forms of postmodern American poetry do just this; they lay bare the device of intellectual labor, so that one cannot fully comprehend the significance of a given work without taking labor into account. Labor, then, is “what eludes representation,” in Watten’s words, and what is self-reflexively represented in procedural forms. And the “site” of the poem becomes the site of transcoding itself.

Overview

Even in the relatively fragmented field of postmodern American poetics, linking Berrigan, Antin, Silliman, and Hejinian together in the same study is an unusual choice; collectively, these poets are united neither by style nor by milieu. Berrigan, a key figure in the second generation of the New School, is best known for popularizing and extending the aesthetics of John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara. His breezy pop tone and subject matter often seem far removed from the political concerns of Language poets like Silliman and Hejinian. Antin, though he began working with procedural forms in New York, was not part of the New York School of the 1950s and ’60s.11 In terms of poetic genealogy, perhaps the strongest link among Antin, Hejinian, and Silliman is a shared veneration for Gertrude Stein, though all three poets register Stein’s influence in very different ways. In fact, even Silliman and Hejinian—both San Francisco Language poets, both working with procedural forms—produce very distinct texts featuring divergent conceptualizations of labor. In short, this assemblage of poets represents a cross-section and a chronological progression, but not a genealogy. By assembling Berrigan, Antin, Silliman, and Hejinian in the same study, I hope to present not so much a tradition as a range of related writing praxes. Though all four can be loosely grouped under the rubric avant-garde, all are part of different trajectories, and all use procedural form in different ways and to different degrees. Berrigan, for example, experimented with rule-based composition, but he is far from an exclusively procedural poet. Silliman, on the other hand, has returned to procedural forms throughout his career.
In discussing Berrigan, Antin, Silliman, and Hejinian, I hope to illuminate a number of issues relevant to the study of postmodern American poetry. First of all, this book examines a selection of the strikingly varied poetry produced by procedural methods from the early 1960s to the late 1980s. In *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (1991), Joseph M. Conte has provided a theoretical foundation for the discussion of procedural form, but much remains to be said about its various, specific deployments. Berrigan’s semi-intuitive collage work feels quite different from Hejinian’s strictly constrained poetic autobiography, and if each is the result of a specific formal procedure, then these procedures themselves need further exploration and differentiation. This book explores the aesthetic and political significance of four quite distinct examples, though it is not intended as a comprehensive survey of the myriad procedural praxes employed by American poets since the 1960s.

Second, and most importantly, this book uses procedural form as a means to discuss production and consumption within a postindustrial capitalist society. Using an avant-garde literary form as a means to illuminate broad social developments may be unorthodox, but it is also very effective. From the cultural margins, one can see the center more clearly. Experimental poetry is not mainstream cultural production, but it provides a cohesive cultural sample in which labor is legible. Procedural poetry in particular, because of its self-reflexive nature, makes legible the labor involved in its production. And this poetic labor in turn reveals more generalized labor conditions in a postindustrial society. Moreover, writing is itself a form of labor. Literature, as Eagleton reminds us, is “a social activity, a form of social and economic production which exists alongside, and interrelates with, other such forms” (60). With postmodern theorists like Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault suggesting that “writing is the destruction of every voice, every origin” (Barthes, *Rustle* 49) or that “the author does not precede the works” (Foucault, *Reader* 119), it is all too easy to lose sight of the actual labor that writing entails.

Third, this study offers a reconsideration of literary realism and its function within postmodern poetry. To varying extents, a kind of new realism manifests itself in the procedural forms of all four poets in this study. Berrigan, Antin, Silliman, and Hejinian all demonstrate a direct engagement with the conditions of production in contemporary society, and these conditions are ultimately the bedrock of material reality in a capitalist culture. The conditions of production and consumption, the fact of class-based competition, and the economic and material
given that constrain lived experience all contribute to the constitution of material reality, and as these factors change, so does realism. In Hejinian's words, “So from age to age a new realism repeats its reaction against the reality that the previous age admired” (ML 148). The four poets surveyed here may all be considered part of a postmodern poetic reconfiguration of realism, but I will deal explicitly with this subject in my chapter on Silliman.

Finally, this book argues that a political narrative is legible in the progression through the work of these four poets. Within the chronology of this study, there is a general movement toward—and then beyond—Marxian political commitment. This political narrative is not identical with that of the postmodern American poetic avant-garde as a whole, which became most politicized in response to the Vietnam War. Nor is this narrative identical with the development of American procedural poetry, which is by no means inherently Marxist. Rather, the increasing ideological self-consciousness discussed in the following chapters is directly linked to a growing interest in the process and politics of labor. Within this study, Berrigan's poetry represents both a chronological and an ideological starting point. In almost all of his writing, one finds the same lack of explicit political positioning that Caroline A. Jones describes in abstract expressionist painting: “The depoliticization of postwar American art was its politics, tied symbiotically to individualism, figured by the solitude of the studio, and articulated in the abstract brushstroke as the clearest expression of an individual's 'will to form’ ” (24). Thus, it is at the level of form that one must look to find a social critique in Berrigan's work. His collage method becomes a means to reassert a connection with a language that has been commodified by capitalist culture. With Antin, politics becomes self-conscious. A critique of the culture industry and of cold war politics is evident both in the form of the work and in the subject matter. Unlike Berrigan and Antin, Silliman is constrained by both poetic and political praxes, for his Marxism is fundamental to his procedural poetry of the 1970s. Hejinian, while clearly informed by Marxian philosophy, might be said to be post-Marxist, in that her work attempts to move beyond a critique of commodity fetishism to an even more materialist epistemology. She clearly recognizes the exploitive ideology behind consumer culture, but her understanding of the objects in the world is not limited to class critique. Historically, Marxian theory has paid too little attention to life and labor within the domestic sphere, and Hejinian’s work implicitly critiques this oversight by combining an examination of labor (particularly in its reified, commodified
form) with the exploration of a domestic life-world that exists outside the direct influence of the marketplace. In this sense, her poetry provides a feminist analogue to Silliman’s decidedly (and sometimes exaggeratedly) masculine subject matter.

Chapter Breakdown

In the first chapter I discuss the history of postmodern procedural form. This chapter provides an overview of recent critical accounts of procedural poetry, as well as a brief discussion of proceduralism in other genres and media. Chapter two explores Berrigan’s The Sonnets (1964), the most notable work of his short but productive career. In writing The Sonnets, Berrigan employed a collage procedure that involved constantly cutting up and reassembling readymade language. Usually, the ready-mades were his own previous poems, but Berrigan also borrowed readily from other poets. Yet what he called his “method” of rearranging readymade material indubitably marks collaged language as his own. For Berrigan, collage procedure becomes a means of reasserting agency over language, and of reinscribing it with his own labor. Berrigan is certainly not the first poet to use collage form, but his method is notable for its combination of intuitive and arbitrary procedures. At times, he rearranges his sonnets according to numerical constraints, but he also deviates from his own constraints whenever it seems desirable. This idiosyncratic approach to procedure issues an implicit challenge to notions of procedural form as necessarily arbitrary and designed in advance. For Berrigan, procedural form is precisely a means of creatively asserting an authorial presence over language, not an escape from authorial intention. To the extent that his procedure remains legible in the final product, the poems function as a record of his manipulations—which is to say, of his poetic labor.

Antin also makes extensive use of readymade materials. In my third chapter I discuss Antin’s “Novel Poem” (1968), in which sentences and phrases borrowed from popular fiction serve as textual raw material for new poetic constructs. In the surprising juxtapositions and repetitions of Antin’s poem, Stein’s influence is apparent. A more theoretical analogue may be found in the writing of Michel de Certeau, whose theory of “reading as poaching” in The Practice of Everyday Life dovetails with Antin’s practice of poetic appropriation. To produce “Novel Poem,” Antin flipped through novels at random, retyping material that he found interesting. His process of reading and rewriting Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing, Ayn Rand, and others fits with Certeau’s notion that readers
break down the binary between production and consumption in the act of reading. Similar to Certeau’s ideal reader, Antin literally reinvents the text in the process of consuming it. Reading thus becomes a tactic for challenging the one-sided production of the culture industry. And in generic terms, Antin uses poetry to investigate the conventions of the popular novel—its rhetoric and its formulas.

In Silliman’s long poem *Tjanting* (1981), which I examine in chapter four, formal structure is strictly determined by a numerical constraint derived from the Fibonacci number series. Within this numerical procedure, Silliman makes use of what he and other San Francisco Language poets have termed the “new sentence”—a sentence that bears a serial (but not necessarily a semantic) relation to its context. That is, each new sentence can (and often does) introduce radically disjunctive content, so that the reader will have difficulty relating one sentence to the next. At the same time, the juxtaposition of sentences makes a slippage of meaning inevitable. Each sentence inevitably conditions the meaning of the next. At book length, the extended juxtaposition of new sentences adds up to a form that is radically antirealist. The continuity and coherence necessary for a realist narrative disappear in the interstices of the new sentences. However, Silliman fills his poem with references to the material details of daily life in San Francisco in the late 1970s, and these details add up to an entirely new means to represent social reality. Rather than embed the material real within a cohesive narrative framework, as in a nineteenth-century realist or naturalist novel, Silliman includes it in all of its disruptive discontinuity. Thus, the real becomes a kind of constant interruption to realist narrative itself. Ultimately, Silliman’s inclusive detailing of his world functions as a postmodern reworking of literary realism, as well as an instantiation and critique of the formulaic, fragmentary subjectivity that corresponds to postindustrial labor practices.

Hejinian’s formal procedure in *My Life* is, like Silliman’s in *Tjanting*, based on sentence counting. In the 1987 version of *My Life*—which is the subject of chapter five—there are forty-five sections of forty-five sentences each, in keeping with Hejinian’s forty-five years of age at the time of composition. But this autobiographical constraint is only one facet of Hejinian’s formal procedure, which is also informed by Objectivist poetics. By constantly repeating and recontextualizing phrases such as “A pause, a rose, something on paper” and “What is the meaning hung from that depend,” Hejinian turns textual fragments into what I call sentence-objects. These sentence-objects exist both as elements within a form and as the products of poetic labor. The content of *My Life* is
also deeply object-oriented. Quotidian objects function as things in their own right, as commodities, and as metonymic invocations of a contiguous world. In depicting the objects that represent and give meaning to her life, Hejinian adheres to a poetics of particularity, of attention to discrete objects. This object-oriented poetics calls attention to larger epistemological issues, and to the ways in which gender affects one’s understanding of the world. For *My Life* repeatedly foregrounds the domestic sphere and the labor that goes on there. It suggests that objects exist as more than mere commodities—more than reified labor and its concomitant exchange value. Ultimately, the poem suggests the possibility of a post-Marxist, feminist worldview that attempts to reclaim a more immediate experience of life, an experience uninflected by postindustrial labor practices.

By this point, it will be clear that my understanding of form is broad, and that it takes into account the mutually conditioning relationship that exists between formal structure and content. Such a broad conception is necessary if one is to account for the cultural significance of relatively recent formal developments. In this regard, the critical enterprise is not unlike the work of explorers that Hejinian describes in her essay “Strangeness” (1988). According to Hejinian, the writing of explorers had “to be precise and accurate about details and to be equally accurate about every detail” since, during the process of exploration, “one doesn’t know which details are the important ones” (*Inquiry* 140). The same might be said of the process of formal criticism. One does not immediately know the full significance of a new form, and so it is necessary to think about form in broad terms, as a means of making the text, and not simply as a fixed container for it. Postmodern procedural form amounts to a new means of literary production, and as such it has a cultural significance that has yet to be fully explored. In addition to its primary function as an instantiation of the process of literary production, procedural form can serve as a transcoding site, where more generalized social issues become apparent. In the present study, I hope to initiate an investigation into some of these issues, and also to point toward further areas of investigation. If the relatively specialized genre of avant-garde poetry seems an unlikely starting point for a broader consideration of postindustrial production and consumption, it is nonetheless a useful starting point. For the Marxian critic, cultural, political, and economic formations are inextricably intertwined in a social totality. Wherever one begins, one can end up anywhere else within the social whole. The dialectical interplay of product and productive forces always implies a larger
social framework, and it is this larger framework that gives real relevance to any literary study. When Hejinian uses procedural form to catalogue the objects that form and inform an American life, or when Antin uses collage procedure to disassemble the popular novel, they are pointing not only to the isolated concerns of the postmodern poet but also to the everyday lives of the postmodern subject. For the critic, it is crucial to look where they are pointing and to interpret the broad social significance of the gesture.
CHAPTER 1

Procedural Form: An Overview

Composition by predetermined procedure has been a formal option in the repertoire of postmodern American poets for more than half a century. But because procedural forms are as much a means of generating text as of containing it, they are not simple to define. In fact, postmodern poetic form in general is too diffuse to be easily summarized. As Brian McHale explains, there is simply no “‘umbrella’ model capable of accommodating the full range of postmodernist features in poetry” (251). However, “Procedure, chance, constraint—all these features recur throughout postmodernist poetry, where compositional methods designed to limit or channel the poet’s ‘free’ creativity abound” (253). Post-romantic by two centuries, we might wonder what could be the advantage of a form that limits the poet’s creativity and requires the observance of certain preset constraints. Why try “to limit or channel” poetic energies with artificial formal procedures? Why not take advantage of a more romantic or organic concept of form, in which the shape of the poem develops from the inside out, in relation to content?

The answer lies in part in the idea of individuality, or post-individuality, in the case of postmodern poetry. The organically developing form tends to instantiate an unfettered bourgeois subjectivity; it suggests an unfragmented, unselfconscious, holistic artist who produces verse out of an overabundance of poetic feeling. In a postmodern, post-humanist, postindustrial age, such organicism has become anachronistic. Today, the desire for organic form seems to represent nostalgia for the high-bourgeois literature of the nineteenth century, a desire for a creative transcendence of the material conditions of everyday life. This
desire is most manifest in free verse, the very name of which suggests the possibility of evading material, social, and artistic constraints. However, and paradoxically, organically developing free verse has become a normative and normalizing device in itself, even as its lack of formal rigor has become more pronounced. As Marjorie Perloff points out, “free verse, now dominant not only in the United States but also around the world, has become, with notable exceptions, little more than linear prose, arbitrarily divided into line lengths” (Differentials 205). It is in this arbitrary division of lines that the element of formal creativity is most evident, but this is a rather poor formal consolation for the use of a standardized, prosaic writing style that has been old hat for the better part of a century. The postmodern formal alternative, as described by McHale, involves a deliberate foregrounding of the disappearance of individual agency in the production of content. As McHale argues, “all of the procedures used by postmodernist poets can be viewed as virtual machines for generating text, or at least as programs that could be run on such machines—software, then, if not hardware” (253). If the modernist poet constructs a machine made of words, as William Carlos Williams claimed, then the postmodernist poet has simply become the machine.2

Procedural form, then—in opposition to the free verse of the second half of the twentieth century—involves adherence to certain constraints upon the generation of content. In postmodern procedural poetry, “there are as many possible constraints as there are poems, and the constraint is not an external form that is readily recognized but may be a rule that remains largely hidden to the reader” (Perloff, Differentials 208). Like a computer user, the reader may not entirely understand the programming rules behind the textual interface. The rules that govern the virtual machines of poetic form function first and foremost as a means of textual generation, and they may be difficult to fully comprehend in the final form of the work. Yet the formal constraints never just disappear into content, either. As Perloff indicates, constraint in postmodern poetry “is a generative device: it creates a formal structure whose rules of composition are internalized so that the constraint in question is not only a rule but a thematic property of the poem as well” (Differentials 208). I would add to this definition a particularly significant caveat: In all procedural poetry, labor is inevitably “a thematic property.”

For Perloff, postmodern procedural poetry is best exemplified by the French Oulipo (or Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle) writers, who have been developing experimental procedural forms since the 1960s (Differentials 205–208). According to Raymond Queneau, one of the
founding members of Oulipo, the group’s intention is to “propose new ‘structures’ to writers, mathematical in nature, or to invent new artificial or mechanical procedures that will contribute to literary activity” (51). Queneau goes on to discuss a number of formal procedures and constraints that are of interest to Oulipo, including lipogrammatic writing, which involves abstention from the use of a given letter of the alphabet (52); “fixed-form” procedures (used to produce the triolet, rondel, villanelle, etc.), which restrict “the order, alternation, or repetition of rhymes, of words, or even of entire verses” (53–54); the “haikuization” of the sonnet form, which Queneau demonstrates by reducing several of Stéphane Mallarmé’s sonnets to line-ending words only (58–60); and the “S + 7” form, which “consists in taking a text and replacing each substantive with the seventh following it in a given dictionary” (61). Other Oulipo procedures can be more complicated and mathematically sophisticated, but the result is the same: an artificial, predetermined formal device that facilitates the generation of content. In the words of Marcel Bénabou, constraint “forces the system out of its routine functioning, thereby compelling it to reveal its hidden resources”; moreover, “writing under constraint is superior to other forms insofar as it freely furnishes its own code” (41). In more Marxian language, one might say that “writing under constraint” “freely furnishes” the conditions of its own production. Procedures such as the “haikuization” of a sonnet and the “S + 7” substitution place emphasis on the production of writing, as well as the finished product. In such procedural writing, the constraint limits poetic content just as, in any form of intellectual production, cultural and ideological conditions limit productive possibilities.

Oulipian procedural writing bears some similarity to postmodern American proceduralism, especially with regard to the use of ready-made texts, which play an important role in both. But the differences are notable as well. American procedural poetry is a diffuse and heterogeneous phenomenon, without a unified movement to encompass it. While Perloff finds the American “counterpart” to Oulipo “in the work of John Cage, Jackson Mac Low, and the Fluxus poets” (Differentials 211), Joseph Conte (whose Unending Design provides a thorough overview of form in postmodern American poetry) finds examples of procedural form in the work of Louis Zukofsky, John Ashbery, Robert Creeley, Harry Matthews, and Cage, among others. Though Cage, Mac Low, the Fluxus poets, and Matthews (an American Oulipo member) all tend to follow relatively rigorous procedures in the generation of their poetry, the poetry of Zukofsky, Ashbery, and Creeley often drifts quite far from...
procedural constraints. There is no single school or movement that can usefully contain all these poets, which is to say that there is no obvious American counterpart to Oulipo. No single coterie or aesthetic nexus has come to represent the use of procedural form. Nevertheless, Conte’s organization of postmodern American poetry into two overarching formal groupings—serial and procedural—provides a solid foundation for the further study of procedural form in the American context. According to Conte, “Serial and procedural forms are strictly postmodern innovations that can easily be distinguished ... from their romantic and modernist predecessors” (3). Serial form “is determined by the discontinuous and often aleatory manner in which one thing follows another,” and it “offers itself as a distinct alternative to the organic sequence,” which is “a product of romanticism” (3). Procedural form, on the other hand, “consists of predetermined and arbitrary constraints that are relied upon to generate the context and direction of the poem during composition” (3). That the procedure should be “entirely predetermined” is important to Conte, for he emphasizes the point several times (15). While I do not disagree that the basic constraints of a procedural poem are generally decided upon in advance, it is overstating the case to say that the procedure will inevitably be “entirely predetermined.” In a numerically determined procedure, the rules tend to be clear from the beginning. But there are also more fluid procedures that involve intuitive or situational decision making. As we will see, Berrigan’s semi-methodical collage poetry posits constraints even as it diverges from them. The outcome, then, is not entirely predetermined. The final product relies on the poet’s volition: whether the poet will follow his own rules at a given point in the writing process. On the other hand, a true procedural form is never entirely intuitive, either. Whether strictly adhered to or not, constraints remain fundamental to procedural form. Thus, the kind of collage forms employed in Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* or William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* are not procedural, in the postmodern sense. Modernist fragmentation achieves some of the same effects as postmodern proceduralism. Both forms are well removed from what Perloff calls “the authenticity model—the ‘true voice of feeling’ or ‘natural speech’ paradigm” (*Modernism* 3–4). Both forms disassemble the notion of an organic, self-sufficient individual; they turn “natural speech” into textual pastiche. Yet this disassembly of the individual subject must be at least partially predetermined, formulaic, or constrained to be considered procedural.

Though a modernist collage form arranged solely by aesthetic preference does not function in the same way as a postmodern procedural poem, one
can build an element of volition into a procedure without invalidating it. In fact, the tension between volition and constraint is a defining characteristic of procedural poetry, and even in the most rigorous procedural work, some degree of volition remains. For if all elements of volition and personality had to be removed from the procedural poem, the form itself would become unworkable. Even in an extreme case—for example, Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Day* (2003), an 836-page retyping of the September 1, 2000, edition of the *New York Times*—volition is involved. The choice of material, the sequence (does one type left to right, cutting across columns, or does one type each newspaper story discretely?), the medium (book, Web, serial publication)—all reflect authorial intention. Conte recognizes this fact, up to a point, in that “the necessarily idiosyncratic order set in place by the poet’s formal choice rejects any ulterior, societal determination of an appropriate message or the form that should accommodate it” (40). In other words, the poet asserts agency in the premeditated choice of constraints, thereby insuring that the poem will not follow a culturally acceptable path of least resistance. Yet Conte also finds that “rule-dominated composition relieves the poet of the burden of the self, since the ‘personal-ity’ of the artist is no longer called on to direct the creative process” (40). But, as we will see in Berrigan’s work, poets do not always follow their own implicit procedures, nor (as Antin’s poetry demonstrates) do procedural forms necessarily foreclose the artist’s creative agency.3

Although procedural poetry makes use of traditional verse forms, Conte makes a clear distinction between postmodern procedural methods and “traditional closed forms” (15). Whereas a “traditional form is imposed on an already known content in an effort to contain and shape it as an object of art,” a “procedural form is a generative structure that constrains the poet to encounter and examine that which he or she does not immediately fathom, the uncertainties and incomprehensibilities of an expanding universe in which there can be no singular impositions” (15–16). The distinction between traditional form and postmodern procedure is a matter of some importance within Conte’s study, since he discusses forms such as the pantoum and sestina that could easily be considered pre- rather than postmodern. The distinction that he settles upon—traditional form as container, postmodern form as generative device—is in keeping with Perloff’s differentiation of procedural form from “traditional metrics.” According to Perloff,

What has been called *constraint* or *procedurality* is not equivalent to the concept of *rule* in traditional metrics, where the choice of, say,
ottava rima sends a definite signal to the audience that every stanza will have eight lines of iambic pentameter, rhyming abababcc. Rather, a procedural poetics…is primarily generative, the constraint determining, not what is already fixed as a property of the text, but how the writer will proceed with his composition. (Artifice 139)

For Perloff, traditional form involves a kind of contract with the reader, who would presumably be familiar with the rules of the form and expect them to be followed, perhaps with minor variations. Postmodern procedural form, on the other hand, is once again a “generative” device. By and large, such distinctions are useful, though one would not want inadvertently to posit traditional form as perpetually “traditional.” At one point, the sonnet, too, might have been described in the same terms as Conte’s postmodern procedural form, as a “structure that constrains the poet to encounter and examine that which he or she does not immediately fathom.” “Traditional” forms are not inherently traditional, after all; they become so in a certain historical context, and “traditional” forms may deserve the name only because they are received as such, and not because they were traditional in their own day. As Conte demonstrates, part of the distinction between post- and premodern fixed forms is really a difference between New Critical and postmodern receptions of so-called traditional form. Whereas “the New Critics praised ‘craft’ in a poem,” postmodern procedures “are by comparison more militant in their proclamation of artifice,” in that “literary devices should be marked, or in the Russian Formalist phrase, ‘laid bare’” (Conte 43). I would argue that this laying bare of literary devices is simultaneously a laying bare of the evidence of literary production. To some extent, the New Critical desire for a well-crafted poem is the desire for a reified art object that betrays no signs of labor. Postmodern procedural form, by contrast, foregrounds literary labor at the same time that it lays bare literary devices. When, for example, Silliman and Hejinian employ sentence counting as part of their form, they are simultaneously itemizing their own production. When Berrigan publishes multiple versions of the same collage poem in the same collection, he is foregrounding his own process of redaction.

Conte’s discussion of procedural form provides a fairly complete treatment of the aesthetic importance of this mode of writing, but there are two other definitions of procedural poetry worth mentioning here, because they begin to outline the broader cultural implications of the form. Discussing “procedural writing” in Tina Darragh’s
adv. fans—the 1968 series, Kristin Prevallet suggests that we ought to “to appreciate the games and experimentation of such processes as a pushing forward of form and a necessary shattering of the expectations of what a poem, or poetry, is or should be” (124). Recognizing the fundamentally experimental nature of procedural form is crucial to understanding its place in postmodern American poetry, and it is also crucial to my own argument that this form encodes more general conditions of production within postindustrial society. For I would argue that procedural poetry does things that other kinds of poetry do not. It is deliberately and self-consciously exploratory of the function and value of literary labor. Moving beyond the more generalized, self-reflexive constructivism of other forms of postmodern textual production, procedural poetry asks readers to look beyond an ironically self-aware text to the larger social context within which it was produced. Formal constraints in particular analogize ideological constraints in general. Reading procedural texts, one wonders if everyday life has itself become a sort of procedural operation, constrained by rules of which we are often unaware.

Jena Osman gestures toward this aspect of proceduralism when she argues that linguistically “self-conscious” procedural poems “take that self-consciousness and move it into a concrete realm of reader productivity” (256). For Osman, procedural poetry is fundamentally experimental: “[W]e read the poems as if scanning the results of an experiment” (262). Because “[i]t is up to us how we interpret the results and therefore how we envision the procedure followed in order to attain such results,” we ultimately become “both a creator and an interpreter” within the procedural text (262). In other words, we become interpreters twice over. First we serve as interpreters of our own production of meaning, and then we become interpreters of the procedure itself: “Even when procedures are explicitly outlined, the reader must fill in the blank of how the operation actually functions as a mechanism of meaning” (262). The procedural poem, then, requires an examination of the “mechanism” behind its production. And what one finds, of course, is that the “mechanism” is the labor of the individual herself, producing an artifact that is at once a product and a critique of the society in which it is produced. The procedure involved in the production of the poem becomes both its form and content, and the reader is left not with a commodified, reified objet d’art but a concrete, self-reflexive example of the labor process. On one level, the procedural poem works as a kind of transcoding of all cultural production: the self-reflexive form, constantly laying bare the fact of literary labor, is a representative instance of the general conditions of production.
within postindustrial society. More importantly, and more literally, the procedural poem is a record of the work of literature. Read dialectically, as part of a synchronic social totality, the procedural poem becomes a small but significant record of its entire historical moment.

Painters, Novelists, Poets, and Programmers

Poetry is not the only American art form to draw upon procedural constraints in the second half of the twentieth century. During the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s, American visual and conceptual artists made extensive use of formal procedures that emphasize the process of production over the fully realized aesthetic object. This process-oriented aesthetic began with the Abstract Expressionist painters, who “recognized that the action painting itself was the mere record of the series of moves that was the action of painting. The ‘work’ as activity was privileged in this way over the ‘work’ as product” (Sayre 4). Thus, Jackson Pollock’s paintings from the 1950s represent neither more nor less than his emotionally charged process of dripping, spilling, splattering, and flinging paint onto a canvas placed on the floor of his studio. In the 1960s, American procedural art became less individually expressive and more attuned to mechanical and industrial processes. According to Caroline A. Jones, American artists developed “a mode of production that aspires to, or structurally resembles, an industrial process, and/or a self-presentation on the part of the artist that implies a collaboratively generated technological solution or mechanistic goal” (55). An important example of such artistic-industrial proceduralism is to be found in the workings of Andy Warhol’s New York studio, the Factory, which “had the functional structure of a nineteenth-century manufactory” (197). In Warhol’s studio, artists collaborated in a process of pseudo-industrial production to make silkscreen reproductions of pop images (e.g., Marilyn Monroe’s Lips) and simulacra of Campbell’s and Brillo boxes (Jones 196–232). By 1974, Allan Kaprow—generally acknowledged as the creator of the first “happenings”—could claim that an awareness of the procedure behind a given work was essential to a comprehension of its artistic function: “Too many works of art today are made to function as situations, commentaries, or processes, rather than as discrete objects, for us to ignore their contextual role” (161). The poetic moral of this artistic story, in Henry M. Sayre’s words, is simple: “Art is the act of making, not the thing made. This is such an important distinction for contemporary poetics that it cannot be overemphasized” (183). There is a concomitant critical implication to be emphasized also: Critical analysis of procedural
Procedural Form: An Overview

poetry will have to be open to paratextual discourse. That is, the critic must be aware that the writing was produced according to a certain procedure. Questions of aesthetic interest and social relevance will concern formal process and its effects on subject matter as much as subject matter in its own right.

Though known primarily as a novelist, William Burroughs should also be mentioned here as a contributor to postmodern proceduralism. His work is particularly notable in comparison to that of Berrigan and Antin, both of whom used found language in ways reminiscent of Burroughs’s procedures. In 1959, he and Brion Gysin began collaborative experimentation with cut-up texts (Miles 112). Barry Miles describes these experiments in his biography of Burroughs:

Burroughs soon made the cut-up method his own, and began using it to create prose. He explained his methods in a 1964 interview.

“Brion Gysin, an American painter living in Paris, has used what he calls the cut-up method to place at the disposal of writers the collage used in painting for fifty years. Pages of text are cut and rearranged to form new combinations of word and image, that is, the page is actually cut with scissors, usually into four sections, and the order rearranged.”

Sometimes the page was not cut, but folded so it could then be folded again in a different place: “I take a page of text, my own or someone else’s and fold it lengthwise down the middle and place it on another page of text, my own or someone else’s, lining up the lines. The composite text is then read across, half one text and half the other. Perhaps one of ten works out and I use it. (113)

Berrigan and Antin did not literally take scissors to paper in the production of their procedural collage texts, but both poets did use fragments of found or readymade language in ways similar to Burroughs’s cut-up procedure. Likewise, Silliman’s and Hejinian’s recycling of previously deployed language sometimes has a cut-up feel to it. As we will see, though, the procedures employed by these four poets differ in substantial ways from Burroughs’s more hands-on, painterly method.

John Cage and Jackson Mac Low are also key background figures in this study. Antin has cited both as poetic predecessors, and they were, arguably, the most dedicated proceduralists of the postwar era (Antin and Bernstein 96). Yet, for the purposes of the present study, Cage and Mac Low represent...
an earlier moment in the American avant-garde. By the mid-1950s, both men were already experimenting with chance-based procedural forms. Antin and Berrigan did not begin to employ procedural methods until the ’60s, and Hejinian and Silliman did not begin serious use of procedural form until the ’70s. The ten-year generation gap between Mac Low (born in 1922) and Antin (born in 1932, the oldest poet in this study) is small, but the difference between the aesthetic values of Cage and Mac Low and the poets featured here is significant. Perloff and Charles Junkerman identify Cage with a kind of “mystic pragmatism” (2); similarly, Brandon Labelle finds in Cage’s musical conceptions a “mixture of transcendental spiritualism and everyday life” (10), as well as a desire to dispense with the artist’s ego (20). This mysticism, which is perhaps to be expected from “a Californian, evangelical Protestant-cum-Zen Buddhist” (Perloff, “Marcel” 101), is also apparent in Mac Low’s use of chance procedures. Mac Low describes a Zen Buddhist “No-Mind” that exists “below both the conscious ego and the psychoanalytic unconscious”: “It is impersonal, ‘untainted’ by ego. Some of us who have used chance operations to produce works of art have seen these works as embodying or expressing the No-Mind” (“Language” 474). Clearly, this “us” would include Cage. Mac Low acknowledges that this Zen Buddhist proceduralism might seem “obscurantist or mystical” to some, and indeed the procedural poetry I will be discussing exists at a significant remove from any transcendental or mystical notions (475). Although works such as Cage’s _M: Writings ’67–’72_ (1973) or Mac Low’s _Asymmetries 1–260_ (1980) fall within the temporal span of this study, they point toward an earlier, midcentury moment of spiritual, rather than materialist, experimentation. Despite substantial differences in the procedural methods employed by Berrigan, Antin, Silliman, and Hejinian, all are engaged with language at a strictly materialist level. Whether aesthetic or ideological, the effects these poets attempt to produce are immanent to the language itself.

The spiritual or mystical aspect of Cage’s and Mac Low’s procedural poetry is more than a mere authorial afterthought. Zen Buddhism permeates Cage’s work and provides a link to dada experimentalism earlier in the century, despite Cage’s apparent reticence to have his work interpreted as a purely Zen or purely dada product:

Critics frequently cry, “Dada,” after attending one of my concerts or hearing a lecture. Others bemoan the interest in Zen. One of the liveliest lectures I ever heard was given by Nancy Wilson Ross about 1937 at the Cornish School in Seattle. It was called _Zen Buddhism and Dada_. There is a connection possible between the two, but neither
Dada nor Zen are fixed tangibles. They change; and in quite different ways in different places and times, they invigorate actions. . . . What I do, I do not wish blamed on Zen, thought without my engagement with Zen (attendance at lectures by Alan Watts, D.T. Suzuki, reading of the literature) I doubt whether I would have done what I have. (Cage, Writer 78–79)

Despite Cage’s reticence to see Buddhism “blamed” for his aleatory compositions, it is clear that his engagement with this belief system “invigorate[d]” his work. The results of Cage’s rigorous adherence to procedure can be quite striking. His Mureau, for example, is a rather extreme example of the fragmentation produced by procedural forms. The procedure according to which Mureau was composed does not preserve the integrity of individual words, let alone lines. Cage calls Mureau “one of the more unconventional texts” in his book M and describes the composition of the work as determined by a series of aleatory operations:

Mureau departs from conventional syntax. It is a mix of letters, syllables, words, phrases, and sentences. I wrote it by subjecting all the remarks of Henry David Thoreau about music, silence, and sounds he heard that are indexed in the Dover publication of the Journal to a series of I Ching chance operations. The personal pronoun was varied according to such operations and the typing was likewise determined. Mureau is the first syllable of the word music followed by the second of the name Thoreau. (Foreword to M, no pagination)

The “unconventional” quality of the composition is immediately evident:

...sparrowsitA gROsbeak betrays itself by that peculiar squeakariEF-FECT OF SLIGHTEst tinkling measures soundness ingpleasawe hear! Does it not rather hear us? sWhen he hears the telegraph, he thinksthose bugs have issued forthThe owl touches the stops, wakes reverberations d gwalky In verse there is no inherent music eofsttake-stakes a man to make a room silent. (M 35)6

Much more than Berrigan’s Sonnets, for example, or Hejinian’s My Life, Cage’s Mureau is fundamentally disjunctive, and the syntactic and lexical disjunctions read more like a series of computing errors than an artful rearrangement. Cage’s procedure yields some fascinating linguistic
combinations ("squeakari\textit{EFFECT}"; "\textit{gwalky}"), and the text’s scrambled language requires a painstakingly close reading that is oddly mimetic of the close listening that Thoreau himself describes in his \textit{Journals}. At times, the prose begins to develop a mellifluous quality, but it is soon cut off as the text takes a new twist or turn: “Little frogs begin to peep toward sundown noonhorn is heard echoing from shore to \textit{shoreof perch-}
with a loud, rippling rustle think larmed makes life seem serene and \textit{grandinexpressibly serene and grand apparently afraid} with more vigor and \textit{promise bellslee} uttering that sign-like note” (35). The particular kind of cutup and rearrangement occurring in \textit{Mureau} foregrounds the concept as much as the process. One sees Cage’s artistic labor most clearly in the idea behind the work, rather than in the language on the page, which seems almost self-generated. Nevertheless, Cage’s texts are never entirely devoid of authorial agency, and he does occasionally “cheat” his own procedures. For example, Perloff finds “certain odd alterations” in Cage’s use of Marcel Duchamp’s language in the poem “\textit{James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet}” (1981) (“Marcel” 118). While Cage’s proceduralism is clearly more regimented and more spiritually inflected than that of the poets discussed in this book, it exists on the same continuum between strictly conceptualized procedure and intuitive deviation.

This is also true of Mac Low, who cites Buddhist thought as one of several possible inspirations behind his \textit{Asymmetries}, written toward the end of 1960 (\textit{Asymmetries} ix). Like Cage, Mac Low undertook a serious study of Zen Buddhism early in his career:

I’m not sure what nudged me toward asymmetry in late summer 1960. Maybe it was the emphasis on asymmetrical design in Zen Buddhist aesthetics, often expounded by D.T. Suzuki in his Columbia seminars, which I’d attended from about 1954 to 1957, and his books, which I’d begun reading in 1953. (\textit{Asymmetries} 245)

The procedure behind the poems in \textit{Asymmetries} is worth considering here because, as we will see in the next two chapters, Berrigan’s and Antin’s intuitive procedural methods differ substantially from Mac Low’s rigorous aleatory forms. Here is Mac Low’s description of his writing process:

\textit{Asymmetries} are poems of which the words, punctuation, typography, and spacing of words on the page have been determined by certain
kinds of chance operations. With a few exceptions, Asymmetries 1–260, like most of the 501 numbered Asymmetries (1960–61), were generated by an “acrostic-chance” method. This involved drawing words, word strings, and in one case, syllables from current reading matter (or in a few poems, from the environment in which the poems were written). Usually an initial word was found in a text (or in the environment) and words (or strings) having its letters as their initial letters were then found by reading along in the text (or by careful perception of the environment). After the first line, the words or strings of which acrostically “spelled out” the first word, words beginning with the second and subsequent letters of the first word were found to begin the second and subsequent lines, and these words were spelled out in those lines.

The method was complicated by the fact that different acrostic chance-selection subroutines were sometimes used within poems and that punctuation following words, notebook-page edges, and spacing rules based on them determined word placement and spacing. In addition, selection “mistakes” (if not noticed immediately) were usually accepted, and selection-method variations were sometimes based on previous mistakes. (xiii)

Like Antin and, to a lesser extent, Berrigan, Mac Low relies on found texts (“current reading matter”) for source material. But Mac Low’s emphasis on “chance-selection subroutines,” “rules,” “mistakes,” and “selection-method variations” suggests an abdication of selfhood that is not present in Berrigan’s or Antin’s work. Mac Low’s use of the passive voice in the previous passage (“the words, punctuation, typography, and spacing of words on the page have been determined by certain kinds of chance operations”) provides a notable contrast to the poets discussed in the present work, all of whom tend to view themselves as the center of poetic production.” This is not to say that Mac Low is not an intentional producer as well, but once he begins work on one of his Asymmetries, the outcome is, to a large extent, determined in advance. Take “ASYMMETRY 1” for example:

Pain available ingredient.

news

ARTHRITE rule through hand ritual
impelling through.
Having chosen “Pain” as the first word of the poem, Mac Low proceeds to spell the word with the first letters of the other words in the first line: “Pain,” “available,” “ingredient,” “news.” The word is also spelled down the left-hand margin: “Pain,” “ARTHRITIS,” “if,” “now.” Thus, from the moment Mac Low fixes on a word, the dimensions of the poem are already determined. It only remains for him to assemble the remaining lines using a similar acrostic procedure. The words “Pain,” “if,” and “now” all begin additional acrostic procedures running left-to-right across the page. Each word spells itself with the first letters of the following words. The only “mistake” or deviation notable here is in the subsection following “ARTHRITIS.” The acrostic process seems to stutter here, in that the first letters of the words in this section (“ARTHRITIS rule through hand ritual / impelling through. / infinite / Three impending stretching”) spell “arthrititis,” not “arthritis.” One explanation for this misspelling would be that “infinite / Three impending” is to be taken as a word string, with only the first letter (“i”) counting as part of the acrostic. Like Cage’s chance-based compositions, Mac Low’s procedural poetry leaves little room for imaginative agency. Or, more specifically, the poet’s imagination, intentionality, subjectivity, agency, and so forth are most apparent at the conceptual level, in the determination of the process and the choice of the text(s) to be rewritten. Once the process begins, the presence of the poet recedes—something that does not occur within the more intuitive forms employed by Berrigan and Antin or the autobiographical structures of Silliman and Hejinian.

One other procedural poet of the 1960s is worth considering here, by way of contextualizing the present study. Though Vito Acconci is best known as a performance and conceptual artist, he studied at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop and began his artistic career as a poet and as co-editor with Bernadette Mayer of the journal 0 to 9. Like Cage and Mac Low, Acconci often manipulated readymade texts in his poetry. Moreover, he “was influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations, and his poems frequently use their formal procedures to probe idiomatic and colloquial language, turning over phrases to test them from every possible perspective” (Dworkin, Language xiii). As we will see in the fourth chapter,
this interest in Wittgensteinian language games connects Acconci with Antin at the conceptual level, but in practice Antin’s work has a political edge that is lacking in Acconci’s experiments. In the poem “Place, Pass (Off the Ground),” for example, Acconci takes “The first entry (Afghanistan) of ‘Nations of the World’ The 1969 World Almanac” and reprints it “with the punctuation of the second entry” (301). This procedure results in sentences such as the following: “Afghanistan, is a landlocked constitutional, monarchy occupying a mountainous, area much of which, is 4000 ft and more, above sea level It is slightly” (301). Punctuation is at odds with the sense of the sentence, and yet it is still relatively easy to understand the content, a fact that shows punctuation itself to be a sort of arbitrary, standardized imposition on the text. And as the title suggests, the text is ungrounded (“Off the Ground”), unmoored by the defamiliarized punctuation.

This process calls attention to the materiality of the text without directly critiquing content, as Acconci does in “My Performance of Ezra Pound’s ‘Alba,’” a poem that “take[s] on Pound’s imagist mode” and “discursively expands and explodes the signature condensation of the original” (Dworkin, Language xv). Pound’s “Alba” consists of one sentence divided into three short lines: “As cool as the pale wet leaves / of lily-of-the-valley / She lay beside me in the dawn” (36). Acconci’s “Performance” places Pound’s language in italics and integrates it with precisely the kind of unnecessary rhetoric that Poundian imagism shuns. Acconci expands the first line of Pound’s poem as follows: “(For example,) As cool (and cooling) / (Furthermore,) as the pale (until paler) / (Well,) wet (, in fact,) leaves” / (in a manner of speaking, if you leave it to me)”; the second line becomes, “of (live—no,) lily-of-the-valley (They run down / from the hills)”; and the final expanded line reads, “(The reason is that) She lay (there, to the right) / (That is to say,) beside me (, in addition) / (see) (knee) (plea) / (17.) in (18.) the (19.) dawn. / (She was ON the lawn OF the valley, all IN all)” (Acconci 130). Parenthetical additions such as “For example,” “Furthermore,” and “The reason is that” add argumentative rhetoric to the poem and call attention to the claim implicit in the central trope: She is like a flower. Other additions (“and cooling,” “until paler, “there, to the right”) add superfluous specificity to the poem. “See,” “knee,” and “plea” all call attention to alternate rhyme words that Pound might have chosen. Rather than “She lay beside me,” he might have written, “She could see . . .,” and so on. As for the numbers “17,” “18,” and “19,” they are simply a word count, provided that one considers the hyphenated “lily-of-the-valley” as four separate words. As Craig Dworkin notes, Acconci’s rewriting does indeed issue a challenge to Poundian imagism, but the significance of this particular challenge is limited, since imagism
was (even for Pound), half a century out of date by the time Acconci rewrote “Alba.” As in Acconci’s rewriting of the Afghanistan entry, his performance of Pound functions primarily as an aesthetic and structural (rather than directly political) critique.

At the level of subject matter, Berrigan’s *Sonnets* is, like Acconci’s “Performance,” a primarily aesthetic intervention. Though a historically attentive reading will draw out the inevitable social significance of Berrigan’s procedural form, his *Sonnets* does not incorporate a vocabulary of political resistance. This will change with Antin, whose paraphrase of the federal regulations governing treatment of the American flag may be productively compared to Acconci’s Poundian rewriting. Antin’s “code of flag behavior” involves a performative rewriting of a preexisting text, but this rewriting has a decidedly political resonance:

| the flag should never be displayed with the union down except as a sign of distress |
| the flag should never touch anything underneath it such as the ground the floor or water |
| it should never be carried laid out flat or horizontally but always aloft and free |
| it should not be festooned drawn back or up in folds |
| the flag should never be used to cover a ceiling |
| it should never have placed on it or attached to any part of it any mark insignia letter word figure design picture drawing of any nature whatsoever |
| the flag should never be used as a receptacle for receiving holding carrying or delivering |
| it should not be used for advertising purposes and when the flag is in such condition that it is no longer fit for use |
| as an emblem of display |
| it should be destroyed |
| in a dignified way |
| preferably by burning (SP 37) |

This poem was published in 1968 in the eponymously titled collection *code of flag behavior*, and the inevitable political context is the American war in Vietnam. During this turbulent era, the burning of the American flag became a symbolic means to protest the war. In this context,
Antin’s series of otherwise neutral directives becomes a condemnation of American imperialism. The statement “the flag should never be displayed with the union down except / as a sign of distress” begs the question, is the nation in distress? References to “the ground the floor or water” suggest the actual situation on the ground in an embattled Vietnam. The directive to keep the flag “aloft and free,” calls the concept of freedom itself into question. What does it mean to keep a national symbol “free” if this is simultaneously a symbol of imperialism? And if the flag “should not be used for advertising purposes,” what is one to make of the collusion between military might and economic prosperity in the 1950s and 1960s? Don’t images of the flag on military uniforms and vehicles advertise American hegemony? By the time we reach the final lines of the poem (“and / when the flag is in such condition that it is no longer fit / for use / as an emblem of display / it should be destroyed / in a dignified / way / preferably by burning”) this regulation seems more like a call to action. The reader is led to question what exactly the flag signifies, and to consider what action is appropriate if the flag no longer represents the reader’s own social values. In conceptual terms, Antin’s exploration of rhetoric and politics in “code of flag behavior” is similar to Acconci’s exploration of imagist aesthetics in “My Performance of Ezra Pound’s ‘Alba.’” But Antin’s approach is more confrontational, and Silliman’s will be as well. With Hejinian, as we will see, the social critique becomes more nuanced and more exploratory.9

If Georg Lukács is correct in positing a “structure of consciousness” that exists across social divisions, then we would expect to see evidence of this structure manifesting itself in various cultural formations (History 98).10 Painting, poetry, fiction, and other arts will inevitably register postindustrial conditions of production. One particularly striking example of the effect of these new conditions of production on the arts is the development of digital (or electronic) poetry. Postindustrial production is characterized by new information technologies, and digital poetry represents a wholesale collaboration with these new technologies. Moreover, digital poetry is formally similar to procedural poetry.11 In Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries (2002), Loss Pequeño Glazier suggests that digital poetry has its origins in paper-based proceduralism:

The terrain of e-poetries was first entered with poets investigating the significance of procedure in the generation of poetry texts. This early stage in the evolution of e-poetries, of course, does not require a computer at all. A program simply executes an algorithm, or set of
instructions; a set of fixed instructions that spell out a process for generating a work shares a lot in common with a computer program. Procedural works or programmed poetry, then, significantly introduces the algorithmic method to contemporary poetry. (126–127)

Glazier also contends that “the digital text signals not just a change in writing practices but part of a change in consciousness of the entire culture” (28). This is an argument that I would extend to paper-based procedural poetry as well. The desire to generate texts using predetermined formulae or methods is in keeping with larger changes in information technologies in the postindustrial era. Again, the machine made of words has become the poet as machine, or as computer. Like Glazier, C. T. Funkhouser finds broad social significance in the development of digital poetry:

Like Williams, Pound, and Eliot were in their era, digital poets are confronted with social and artistic fragmentation in the world around them and—whether consciously or not—use the atomization and hybridization of texts to both subvert and reflect the complex of cultural information. Authors working on the page and screen in the postatomic era use fragmentation to legitimize fragmentation and challenge the stability of language as a point of meaning; this process of reassembling disparate pieces via technology offers the means to impart a sense of coherence. (12)

Here again, I would suggest that the argument about digital poetry can be applied also to procedural poetry. Both as a precursor of digital poetics and in its own right, procedural poetry is a sign of the times. Funkhouser is particularly astute in his observation that poems can “both subvert and reflect” a “complex of cultural information.” In some instances, procedural forms appear to manifest larger trends in postindustrial labor. Yet they also implicitly critique these trends by calling attention to them. The self-reflexivity of procedural forms—the fact that these forms foreground the labor involved in their production—invites a larger consideration of labor itself. In Marxism and Form, Frederic Jameson argues that “particularly in middle-class society, the fact of work and of production—the very key to genuine historical thinking” has become “a secret as carefully concealed as anything else in our culture” (407). Procedural
Poetry challenges this “secret” amnesia. Far from appearing spontaneous or effortless, it constantly highlights the work of production. For Jameson, this is true of all “art-literature,” which can be said to reckon the whole value of its own creation itself into the process, so that the inner form of literary works, at least in modern times, can be said to have as their subject either production as such or literary production as well—both being in any case distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the work. (409)

However, procedural poetry is a special case in that the secret of production is no longer a secret, no longer only an “inner form.” To the extent that a poem’s procedure remains visible either in the form itself or in a contextual narrative, the poem directly challenges the disappearance of the signs of production. In other words, the visibility of a procedure subverts commodity fetishism itself: “This is indeed the very meaning of the commodity as a form, to obliterate the signs of work on the product in order to make it easier for us to forget the class structure which is its organizational framework” (Jameson, Form 2). The visibility of intellectual labor in procedural poetry challenges this obliteration of “the signs of work on the product” in a far more direct way than an average piece of “art-literature.”
CHAPTER 2

Making Poems: The “method” of Ted Berrigan’s Sonnets

Within the present study of poetic form and its relation to labor, Ted Berrigan’s proceduralism represents one end of an ideological continuum, and thus serves as a useful point of departure. Unlike the work of David Antin, Ron Silliman, and Lyn Hejinian, Berrigan’s Sonnets (1964) manifests no obvious ideological commitment. This is not to say that the work is without political significance—far from it. But Berrigan’s own concern is primarily with the micropolitics of the New York poetry scene, and not with larger socioeconomic issues. This lack of visible class-consciousness makes Berrigan’s work an interesting limit case, in that one has to delve into formal analysis to reconstruct the relationship between Berrigan’s procedural form and the larger conditions of production within society as a whole.

Written in 1963, The Sonnets predates the Vietnam-era politicization of the avant-garde. And yet, in terms of form, Berrigan’s work can be read as a critique of labor conditions in the postindustrial United States. In his cutup-and-collage treatment of the sonnet form, he manifests a drive to reverse the processes of commodification and of alienation from language. As we will see, Berrigan’s proceduralism intuitively and repeatedly attempts to reconnect the poet to the poem, which is to say the laborer to the object of labor. His manipulation of readymade language manifests a desire to reverse the process of linguistic reification, and to re-encode the presence of the author in the writing itself. Thus, while the politics of labor is absent at the level of subject matter, it is always
implicit in the form of *The Sonnets*. In repeatedly assembling and reassembling units of language, Berrigan’s work can also be said to register the repetitive, mechanized conditions of intellectual labor in postindustrial society. In this sense, *The Sonnets* simultaneously instantiates cultural production and encodes the conditions of production that exist within the social totality.

In the last decade, Berrigan’s poetry has begun to receive renewed attention from publishers and critics alike. In 2000, Penguin issued a republication of *The Sonnets* that includes a valuable introduction and end notes by the poet Alice Notley, Berrigan’s second wife. In the notes, Notley transcribes many of Berrigan’s 1982 annotations to a 1963 manuscript of *The Sonnets*. These annotations provide new insights into the compositional method behind the sequence, and they also reveal much of the source material for Berrigan’s cutup and collage procedures. The new edition also includes thirteen poems that were absent from the original 1964 “C” Press publication, which included only sixty-six of the eighty-eight sonnets Berrigan originally wrote. Notley’s 2005 edition of *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan* represents another significant development in Berrigan scholarship and in the continuing reception of his work. Featuring more than 600 pages of poetry, *The Collected Poems* lends shape and coherence to Berrigan’s ambitious but often uneven oeuvre. His poetry has also been the subject of several recent critical discussions. In *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde*, Libbie Rifkin examines *The Sonnets*—as well as Berrigan’s work as the editor of “C” magazine—in terms of his career as an avant-gardist. She argues that, within *The Sonnets*, one can observe “a largely unknown poet playing the field in an attempt to produce a self-legitimating career” (110). In her reading of Berrigan’s self-promotional efforts—a reading informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu—Rifkin seeks to “articulate the intersection of individual ambition and collective production” and to examine Berrigan’s self-promotion and self-invention, his “self-canonicalizing maneuvers” (110–111). Tony Lopez’s article “‘Powder on a Little Table’: Ted Berrigan’s Sonnets and 1960s Poems” (2002) connects “Berrigan’s inventive appropriation of the sonnet sequence” to the “industrial image-reproduction processes” of pop artists Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol (281). And in *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s*, Daniel Kane offers an extensive discussion of Berrigan’s central role within the “Second Generation” of New York School poets. Taken as a whole, this recent body of work has created
opportunities for a reevaluation of Berrigan’s contribution to postmodern American poetics.

Within the context of the present study, I am particularly interested in Berrigan’s modifications of the sonnet form, as well as his cutup-inspired method of assembling appropriated language, and the cultural implications of these formal developments. Because Rifkin has previously discussed the canonical and micropolitical significance of Berrigan’s formal procedure, it will be worthwhile to summarize her argument here, in order to differentiate my own approach to Berrigan’s formal innovations. Rifkin is primarily concerned with Berrigan’s role as “a producer not only of poetic collages but of poetic coteries” (110). She argues that his “formal experiments are best understood through their social aims and effects,” and in referring to the “social” she has a specific cultural milieu in mind: the American literary avant-garde (110). According to Rifkin, “Berrigan wrote himself into the institution of the avant-garde by anticipating the moment when the institutions around poetry fold back into poetry itself” (111). He made a place for himself within the New York scene by constantly citing influences like John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara, and by textually apprenticing himself to the New York School. The result is that Berrigan became a key figure and a literary community-builder within the “Second Generation” of the New York School: “The crown of ‘second generation’ sat easily on Berrigan’s head. Indeed, his poetry is so roomy, so full of other poets’ names and lines, that it emerges as a kind of free-love alternative to traditional figurations of literary family as necessarily nuclear, claustrophobic, and oedipal” (111). The “names and lines” in question belong most often to other New York School poets, but Rifkin is also interested in the influence of Keats on Berrigan’s careerism and in both poets’ reworking of the Shakespearean sonnet form. Keats’s work, like Berrigan’s, reveals “a stylistic response to a largely class-based alienation from authority” (112). For Keats, the use of the Shakespearean sonnet form “teases the poet into visions of bardic greatness” (112). Both Keats and Berrigan were deeply concerned with their future canonicity, and this concern opens up imitative possibilities: “In seeking to launch himself into posterity via the sonnet sequence, Berrigan tries on not so much a model of poetic form signed by Shakespeare as a model of poetic career signed—at least for the purposes of twentieth-century poets—by Keats” (112). Rifkin goes on to discuss a number of other issues related to *The Sonnets* and to Berrigan’s career, including the “proceduralism and seriality” evident
in Berrigan’s sonnet sequence (115); his imitations of—and borrowings from—Ashbery, Mayakovsky, O’Hara, and Shakespeare; his process of composition by imitation; his collage process using the work of other poets; the influence of O’Hara’s “I do this I do that’ poems” (127); and Berrigan’s overarching tendency to look for “his poetic material (even his identity)” in “that of his friends and colleagues” (129).

Rifkin admirably elucidates the careerist motivations behind Berrigan’s poetic procedure. But poetic form has a cultural significance beyond the limits of an avant-garde coterie or an individual career. As Fredric Jameson points out, “the propaedeutic value of art lies in the way in which it permits us to grasp the essentially historical and social value of what we had otherwise taken to be a question of individual experience” (Form 407). So what is “the essentially historical and social value” of Berrigan’s Sonnets? In this chapter, I argue that The Sonnets represents an innovative approach to literary production, an approach in which the methodical rearrangement of readymade language (often from Berrigan’s own earlier poems) marks previous instances of literary production with the signs of subsequent literary labor. This formulaic procedure evinces larger conditions of postindustrial intellectual production, as well as Berrigan’s idiosyncratic authorial presence. Of course, idiosyncrasy is not originality; as Rifkin has demonstrated, Berrigan is not a highly “original” poet. Rather, idiosyncrasy suggests the particular blend of mannerisms and peculiarities that constitute an individual style. Stylistic idiosyncrasy is, in many ways, a product of an individual poet’s cultural appropriations and assumptions—a cultural amalgam that Derek Attridge calls an “idioculture.” An idioculture can be defined as

an individual’s grasp on the world…mediated by a changing array of interlocking, overlapping, and often contradictory cultural systems absorbed in the course of his or her previous experience, a complex matrix of habits, cognitive models, representations, beliefs, expectations, prejudices, and preferences that operate intellectually, emotionally, and physically to produce a sense of at least relative continuity, coherence, and significance out of the manifold events of human living. (21)

Berrigan’s procedural form in The Sonnets entails an inscription of his own idiocultural identity on preexisting literary products. He proceeds
by blending his own work and that of other poets in such a way that the final product displays his own idiocultural encoding. The form does not result in absolute originality—individual components and influences are still recognizable—but it does result in a defamiliarized product that displays the evidence of Berrigan’s individual labor. In keeping with Attridge’s terminology, this partial originality can be called cultural “singularity,” which involves “a configuration of general properties that, in constituting the entity (as it exists in a particular time and place), go beyond the possibilities pre-programmed by a culture’s norms, the norms with which its members are familiar and through which most cultural products are understood” (Attridge 63). Here the “entity”—The Sonnets—reconstitutes norms of literary property and identity by recycling lines from older poems. The notion of singularity is especially apropos to Berrigan’s method of textual rearrangement, in that “[s]ingularity is not pure: it is constitutively impure, always open to contamination, grafting, accidents, reinterpretation, and recontextualization” (63). Impurity is fundamental to Berrigan’s form, which mixes his own work with that of other writers, and his present production with his past output.

Adjectives such as “singular” and “idiosyncratic”—while accurate in describing Berrigan’s postmodern sonnet sequence—leave us at the level of isolated aesthetic critique rather than social commentary; however, The Sonnets lends itself to a broader project of cultural and social criticism, despite the work’s largely apolitical subject matter. Jameson notes that, to some extent, “all literary works…emit a kind of lateral message about their own process of formation. The event of the reading, in other words, only partially obliterates that earlier event of the writing upon which, as in a palimpsest, it is superposed” (Prison-House 89). In The Sonnets, this palimpsestic form is itself doubled. One reads over the previous act of writing, and this previous act of writing often covers over its own assemblage of textual antecedents. Otherwise said, we read Berrigan rewriting. And in reading him rewriting, we encounter the text’s fundamental social critique in the form of a reaction against the alienating effects of commodified language within postindustrial capitalist culture. I say “reaction,” because Berrigan’s process in The Sonnets essentially—and counterintuitively—asserts a kind of ownership over language that is, I would argue, a reaction to a feeling of disconnection from contemporary language. The desire to assert an individual connection to language is, according to Jameson, a result of “the reification of everyday language” in capitalist society. It is the job of poetry to help
reconnect us with a language that has been overtaken by “distant centers of production”:

Surely one of the unique features of the situation of poetry today . . . is its mission to overcome the reification of everyday language. Modern poetry emerges from the inarticulacy of people in contemporary capitalist society. Over against their sense of the “seriality” of daily life and daily speech, that is, the feeling that the center is always elsewhere, that this language belongs not to us who use it, but to someone else, in distant centers of production of the media, publishing, and the like, over against this sense of the draining away to some absent center of the very power to speak, modern poetry reasserts its production of language and reinvents a center. The very difficulty of modern poetry is in direct proportion to the degree of reification of everyday speech. (Reader 118)

In Jameson’s formulation, the “difficulty of modern poetry” functions in reaction to “contemporary capitalist society.” This notion of modernist difficulty faintly echoes T. S. Eliot’s understanding of tradition, which is also difficult to absorb: “It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour” (Eliot 100). But the postmodern difficulty of Berrigan’s Sonnets is not quite of a piece with the modernist difficulties presented by Eliot’s erudite allusions and quotations. Rather than reconnect to language through recourse to a pedantic literary traditionalism, Berrigan reconnects through a process of textual reassemblage that foregrounds the labor of writing and redaction. His work—his intervention in the language—is always apparent. As a result, Berrigan’s poems resist reduction to discrete, reified linguistic objects.

Berrigan’s use of the same prefabricated textual materials in new combinations and contexts serves (perhaps paradoxically) as a means to encode his authorial presence within the text. Repetition functions not only as a unifying principle but also as an assertion of the poet’s particular aesthetic and formal concerns. This is not to say that the repetition of key lines adds up to a poetic “voice”; rather, it adds up to an idiosyncratic principle of poetic construction that governs the process of textual assemblage. This idiosyncratic repetition ultimately works to encode what Marjorie Perloff has called a “signature”: “the mark of difference that separates one identity from another, no matter how fully the two share a particular group aesthetic” (Differentials 135). The concept
of the signature is Perloff’s response to the purported disappearance of authorial presence in Language poetry. Given the postmodern author’s theory-death, how, Perloff wonders, does one describe the uniqueness of a poet’s work? The idea of a poetic “voice” is problematic, since it “implies, quite inaccurately, that speech is primary and prior to writing and that hence a poem is simply the outward sign of a spoken self-presence” (135). For Perloff, the answer is the signature. She explains that, etymologically, the term signature refers to an “identifying mark” (136), a concept that “became suspect in post-structuralist theory” (136). And yet post-structuralist suspicions do not abrogate the utility of the signature as a conceptual device, since “in practice we do take signatures seriously as marks of a particular individual, a cultural practice, an historical period, a national formation, a convention, and so on” (137). “Indeed,” Perloff continues, “if our purpose is to understand specific writing practices, individual as well as generic, we can hardly avoid noting their individual stamp or mark of authorship” (137). Berrigan’s process of repetition and reassembly leaves precisely such a “mark of authorship.”

In addition to producing a poetic signature, Berrigan’s process might also be said to offer a postmodern update to the definition of property outlined by John Locke in section twenty-seven of The Second Treatise of Government:

Though the Earth, and all inferior Creatures be common to all Men, yet every Man has a Property in his own Person. This no Body has any Right to but himself. The Labour of his Body, and the Work of his Hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his Labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his Property. It being by him removed from the common state Nature placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it, that excludes the common right of other Men. For this Labour being the unquestionable Property of the Labourer, no Man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good left in common for others. (305–306)

Of course, the raw textual material on which Berrigan labors cannot be said to exist in a “State that Nature hath provided.” It is already the result of Berrigan’s (or another author’s) previous labor. But in the act of reassembling this textual material, Berrigan most definitely “hath mixed his
Labour with” it, and in this sense—regardless of its origins—the material becomes part of his own oeuvre. To varying degrees, this is always the case with modern and postmodern ready-made art. It is not so much in the finding that “found” art becomes the “work” of a given artist; it is in the representation of the work, which inevitably entails an admixture of artistic labor with the product itself, even if it is only in the form of a signature (think Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*). Berrigan’s sonnets function both as finished products and as raw material to be redacted. Each poem can be reworked, spliced with other poems, peppered with lines by other poets, and generally rearranged without replacing other versions. In short, it is the labor process itself, not the (re)appearance of a series of lines, that defines a Berrigan sonnet.

**Procedural Form and the “method” of The Sonnets**

That *The Sonnets* are derived from a procedural form is clear, but how exactly this procedure functions and how strictly it may have been employed are another matter. In Berrigan’s manuscript notations, Notley finds references “to a ‘method’ or ‘the method,’” but she explains that “Ted never really delineated the whole method to anyone” and so “it may be assumed to have been various” (Intro x). In some sonnets, the “method” “is a mechanical procedure that cannot be violated no matter the outcome,” but in a majority of the poems “it’s difficult to determine how the materials were chosen and ordered” (x, xi). Berrigan apparently incorporated “phrases, lines, or blocks of material from previous sonnets, exclusively or in combination with new material,” and a number of the sonnets “are composed of lines or blocks of lines from older poems” or “lines by other poets” (xi). Moreover, the sonnets “are pervaded by instincts learned from using chance methods” (xi). The instinctual aspect of this method perhaps calls into question its rigor as a procedure, but at times it is, in fact, rigorous. Notley points to sonnets XV and XXX as examples of poems that follow a strict “mechanical procedure,” and it will be useful to consider them for a moment (x). Sonnet XV “is an old sonnet of Ted’s whose lines have been rearranged . . . until what was formerly the ending of the poem is now in the middle and vice versa” (x).2

In his 1982 manuscript notes, Berrigan calls this poem “The only one in the book that can be reconstituted,” and in fact it is reconstituted in sonnet LIX3 (*TS* 82). Even in its “reconstituted” or pre-cutup form, the poem furnishes an intriguing example of Berrigan’s aesthetic concerns, especially in its emphasis on the visual arts. Sonnet LIX begins with a
reference to “Joe Brainard’s collage,” thereby suggesting a visual analogue to Berrigan’s literary procedure (*TS* 54). Like many of Berrigan’s sonnets, a collage is produced by manipulating or cutting up readymade material, and in fact Berrigan’s ekphrastic exercise describes the “sixteen ripped pictures / Of Marilyn Monroe” and “the fifteen pieces / of glass” that Brainard has employed in his collage (54). A reference to Marilyn Monroe’s “white teeth / white-washed by Joe’s throbbing hands” calls attention to the manual labor employed in this artistic process, and implicitly recalls Berrigan’s labor as well. The poem concludes with the assertion that “the sonnet is not dead,” thereby calling attention to Berrigan’s postmodern retrofitting of this form.

Yet sonnet LIX, the syntactically normative version of the poem, simply does not have the enticing ambiguity of sonnet XV, the cutup version. In fact, as Notley points out, the cutup version “becomes stranger after you understand how to reassemble it: its disjunctive form seems to assert itself more and more strongly as the real one” (*CP* 669).4 I would argue that this effect derives in part from the fact that the cutup poem requires more of the reader. Attentive readers will sense immediately that sonnet XV can be reconstructed, even if they are uncertain of the particular tactics necessary to piece the poem back into narrative continuity. The sense of deferred signification effected by the cutup form necessitates an active, participatory reading process; it also contributes to the intrigue of the various enjambments. For example, the second line of sonnet LIX mentions “William Carlos Williams,” and the third line refers to him as “the hungry dead doctor” (54). In this case, the identity of the doctor is clear. But in sonnet XV, the second line of sonnet LIX becomes line fourteen. Thus, the reader must wait until the final line of the cutup poem to learn the identity of this mysterious “hungry dead doctor.” Other ambiguities present themselves as well. Sonnet LIX includes a quote from Brainard’s diary, in which he confesses to being “horribly upset because Marilyn / Monroe died” and solacing himself with “King Korn popcorn” at “a matinee B-movie” (54). This sequence of events becomes mildly homoerotic in sonnet XV, where the identity of the speaker is obscured, and it seems that the poet himself goes “to a matinee B-movie / washed by Joe’s throbbing hands” (14). Because the phrase “washed by Joe’s throbbing hands” is evidently misplaced, one wonders who or what exactly is receiving the hands-on treatment.

Another “mechanical procedure” noted by Notley may be found in sonnet XXX, which “is composed of the first lines of the previous fourteen sonnets” and is “arranged according to the same formula as Sonnet
No obvious semantic order can be restored to the lines assembled in sonnet XXX, but the poem is far from meaningless. In the first three lines of the poem, we enter an indeterminate place full of “closed air” where an unnamed woman “guards her chalice in a temple of fear” and “each tree stands alone” amid “gentle, pleasant strains” (TS 27). This highly symbolic landscape gives way to New York School namedropping in lines five through nine, where we meet “Marge,” “Andy Butt,” “Pollock,” “Henry,” and “Bernie” (27). Lines ten through fourteen contain gnomic statements about “love” and “children,” as well as references to “a white boy” and to “the 15th day of November in the year of the motorcar” (27). The date is Berrigan’s birthday, and it also subtly alludes to Gertrude Stein, whose enthusiasm for “the motorcar” is well-known and whose literary “portraits” include a depiction of T. S. Eliot titled “The Fifteenth of November” (Notley, CP 670). It is tempting to try to arrange this collection of symbols, allusions, and statements into some sort of narrative order, but it is equally clear that any such order will have to be provisional. Interpretive openness is inherent in the form. Within this collage of lines, meaning is produced but not foreclosed. To the extent that a narrative suggests itself, its shape will be dependent on a reader’s individual associations. Of course, this is true to a limited extent of any piece of writing, but within Berrigan’s form, “rejection of closure” (Lyn Hejinian’s term) is the point. His “method” of producing sonnets is also a means of producing a more active and individual readerly engagement with text. Moreover, Berrigan’s assemblage process repeatedly highlights new narrative possibilities within the sonnet sequence. The various “characters” of sonnet XXX—“Marge,” “Andy Butt,” “Henry,” “Bernie,” the “white boy”—have not previously appeared in the same narrative context. By running these lines through what Rifkin calls “a sonnet machine,” Berrigan builds a story that is latent in the overall sequence but only elaborated here (123). He constructs a new relationship to his own written material, producing novelty through recontextualization.

If Berrigan’s “method” always functioned according to clearly defined rules, it would fit neatly within Joseph Conte’s definition of postmodern procedural form. As we have seen, Conte argues that postmodern procedural form “rejects the concept of a form superimposed on preexistent content; instead, it presupposes a system of arbitrary constraints which functions as a generative device” (40). In the case of sonnet XXX, for example, the constraint involves a sequential juxtaposition of first lines, and this formal constraint generates the content for a new poem. According to Conte, “a priori formal choices” and “rule-dominated composition”
remove “the burden of the self” from the poet, “since the ‘personality’ of the artist is no longer called on to direct the creative process” (40). And yet Berrigan does not always submit his own instinctive writing process to predetermined constraints. He is not entirely willing to be free of “the burden of the self,” as Conte puts it. Frequently, Berrigan’s method involves a kind of intuitive substitution and reworking. Sonnet XXI, which Notley finds to be a sort of mediating instance between strict proceduralism and intuitive mixing, furnishes a good example. The poem “is a rearrangement of all the lines of ‘Penn Station,’” and although it is “partly ordered according to” the procedural method of sonnets XV and XXX, it does not entirely follow this method (Notley, Intro x). Instead, “Penn Station” represents something of a compromise between intuition and constraint, in that—like the majority of Berrigan’s sonnets—it deviates rather drastically from the traditional sonnet form. There are fifteen lines rather than the usual fourteen, and no regular metrical pattern to speak of. As for content, the poem presents a strange mélange of imagery drawn from Irish tradition and Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Tarzan stories. Berrigan explains in his manuscript that the poem “has an actual event in it—the 1963 St. Patrick’s Day Parade” (TS 81). The first line (“On the green a white boy goes”) introduces an interesting play of color that will continue throughout the poem (TS 11). The “green” may refer to a park or a common area in the city, but it also suggests the festive background colors of the parade. The reference to the “white boy” is perhaps in keeping with the theme of Irish ancestry, but it is also heavy-handed in its insistence on race as a defining category. In the next line the racial dynamics become more complex, as “Three ciphers and a faint fakir” appear (11). If whiteness is normative at the St. Patrick’s Day parade, then one can read “ciphers”—nonentities—as white and the “faint fakir” as a figure who is trying to blend in, to pass. The poet seems to be counting these four figures in line three (“One Two Three Four”) before drifting into reflections upon “radio waves” and an open mouth or cavern (“the dark path of breath”) that leads into an adventure story (“the treasure Gomangani”) (11). Berrigan’s manuscript notes identify “Gomangani” as “either White Ape (Tarzan) or Black Apes (The Apes) hence, I forget . . . ,” and Notley explains that he is referring to Burroughs’s Tarzan stories (TS 81). Thus, the imperative in line seven (“bring the green boy white ways”) seems to point as much to the context of the Tarzan adventures as it does to New York City in 1963. The “green boy” could literally be dressed in green for the parade (a mark of Irishness?), but the reference to “white ways” is a reminder of what the Gomangani do not possess in Burroughs’s racist
novels. In lines eight through ten, the poem transitions from another reference to “the wind” to an apparent discussion of Keats’ interest in bear-baiting and his frustrated libido, as a voice that may or may not belong to the poet identifies Keats as “a baiter of bears / Who died of lust” (11). New York City and Burroughs’s African jungle become thoroughly conflated by line eleven, where “the green jungle” points both to the Tarzan context and to the crowded urban milieu (11). Then the poet begins to back out of the idiocultural, interior world occupied by Tarzan and Keats and reenter the world of flower shops and parades, where an unspecified “we” goes to “The mien florist’s” in preparation for the Saint Patrick’s Day parade (11). The poem ends in the media-rich present with a reference to “all those radio waves” (11). This reference may point to the multimedia afterlife of the Tarzan stories, which were broadcast over the radio in the 1930s and again in the early 1950s. By the end of the poem, one realizes that the combined references to “all those radio waves” in line four and “Gomangani” in line six may refer to a memory of listening to the Tarzan radio show as much as to any experience of actually reading Burroughs.

The tenuous progression in “Penn Station” from external phenomena to internal idioculture and back again is completely upset in sonnet XXI, which rearranges the former poem according to a semiregular procedure. This new arrangement revises the ambiguous racial allegory of “Penn Station,” and it does so precisely at the point where Berrigan deviates from his own implicit rules. Sonnet XXI begins according to the pattern 1, 15, 2, 14, 3 (with each number referring to line placement in the original, non-cutup poem). If this pattern were maintained throughout, line six of sonnet XXI would correspond to line thirteen of “Penn Station,” and lines seven and eight of sonnet XXI would correspond to lines four and twelve of “Penn Station.” But this particular ordering of lines never occurs. At line six, Berrigan veers away from the pattern implicit in the first five lines, and instead of line thirteen of “Penn Station” we get line twelve. For lines seven and eight of sonnet XXI—instead of lines four and twelve of “Penn Station,” as the pattern would have required—we get lines seven and eleven. This juxtaposition results in the following enjambed phrase: “Bring the green boy white ways / As so we all must . . . ” (TS 19). With this juxtaposition, Berrigan suggests that “we” as a culture are all complicit in the act of bringing “the green boy white ways”, that is, “we” are all implicated in this allegory of racial oppression. While “green” is obviously not, in and of itself, a racial marker, it serves as a displacement of racial difference in
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the present context. (In fact, the color has been used as a marker of difference in a number of other contexts as well, from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to comic book characters to popular conceptions of space aliens.) Though one could read “green boy” as merely a reference to a youth dressed in green for the parade, to do so would be to foreclose the reading and to miss the significance of the juxtaposition of “green boy” and “white ways,” especially in proximity to the “Gomangani” reference. While I do not want to belabor unnecessarily the reading of a few lines, Berrigan’s deviation from procedure in sonnet XXI has important formal implications. Clearly, Berrigan is a procedural poet with a difference, in that his commitment to arbitrary constraints is limited. He follows his “method” loosely, and when it does not suit him, he changes it. Such flexibility places Berrigan at a remove not only from Conte’s postmodern procedural form but also from the dadaist procedural poem as theorized by Tristan Tzara.

According to Notley, Berrigan’s *Sonnets* was probably influenced by Tzara’s procedure for making newspaper cutup poems⁷; certainly, his procedure was informed by dada writing practices in general.⁸ A brief examination of Tzara’s cutup method will be useful here, in that Tzara’s aleatory procedure provides a contrast to Berrigan’s more intuitive, idiosyncratic collage method.⁹ For Tzara, the newspaper cutup poem is entirely dependent upon chance for its syntax. And yet, Tzara’s famous procedure for the construction of a dada poem does not amount to an abdication of personality, as is the case with Conte’s concept of the postmodern procedural poem. The rules of the newspaper cutup procedure are laid out in “Pour faire un poème dadaïste” (To Make a Dadaist Poem) from the “Sept Manifestes Dada” (Seven Dada Manifestoes, 1924):

Prenez un journal.
Prenez des ciseaux.
Choisissez dans ce journal un article ayant la longueur que vous comptez donner à votre poème.
Découpez l’article.
Découpez ensuite avec soin chacun des mots qui forment cet article et mettez-les dans un sac.
Agitez doucement.
Sortez ensuite chaque coupure l’une après l’autre.
Copiez consciencieusement dans l’ordre où elles ont quitté le sac.
Le poème vous ressemblera.
Take a newspaper.
Take scissors.
Choose from this newspaper an article of the length that you intend to give to your poem.
Cut out the article.
Then carefully cut out each of the words that make up the article and place them in a sack.
Shake gently.
Then remove each clipping one by one.
Copy conscientiously in the order in which they come out of the sack.
The poem will resemble you.
And there you are, infinitely original and with a charming sensibility, though misunderstood by the general public.10

Save for the choice of the article to be cut up, the procedure is entirely non-intentional. Yet, Tzara insists, “Le poème vous ressemblera,” and “you”—the author—will be “original et d’une sensibilité charmante.” At first, this conclusion sounds like little more than dadaist bravado. After all, how can a poem produced by chance demonstrate the poet’s originality and charming sensibility? And in what sense can it be said to “resemble” the poet?

For Jena Osman, the answer lies in “authorial presence and intention” (259). Osman explains that Tzara’s “instructions for a newspaper cutup appear to completely do away with the idea of the poet as prime mover and authorial controller” (259). She finds that, in Tzara’s procedure, “the writer is reduced to the role of an assembly-line worker in a factory that manufactures poems. And in the spirit of Taylorism, that poet is replaceable—anyone can do the job. But according to Tzara, the poet need not fear being replaced/downsized because it is impossible to escape authorial presence and intention” (259). The industrial metaphor is apropos here, in that it points to the labor process in general and, more specifically, to the procedural nature of literary production. In a procedural poem, “authorial presence” is related through literary labor, which is to say through the act of writing or textual manipulation. It is the process of production that inscribes the author’s presence on the work. In Tzara’s dada procedure, the poet’s engagement with language is reduced to a mechanistic performance, and yet this
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performance transfers an element of the poet's individuality into the poem. Presumably, this transference is a result of chance: One poet's work is highly unlikely to look the same as another's. But let us consider, for a moment, an improbable but not impossible scenario. Two poets, unbeknownst to each other, each choose the same newspaper article, submit it to the same procedure, and—by an extraordinary coincidence—the clippings come out of the bag in the same sequence, and the poems are identical. Could one still say that these two poems resemble their authors? Do they still reveal an authorial presence? The short answer, I would argue, is yes. Regardless of the (un)originality of the poems, each will indeed reveal an authorial signature. In fact, every act of literary production inscribes authorial involvement on the text. Even an aleatory procedure involving the nonintentional manipulation of newspaper clippings inscribes authorial presence upon the literary product, in that the process of manipulation automatically and inevitably suggests a manipulating agency—an author. Conversely, if one treats the poem as an isolated, self-generating object and disregards the labor involved in its production, one commodifies it. The poem becomes one more alienated object cut off from the material conditions of its production, and the poet becomes one more alienated laborer cut off from his or her own act of production. Now it is precisely the act of literary production that Berrigan constantly foregrounds with his own variation on the cutup method. By writing and rewriting the same poems throughout The Sonnets, he reminds us that it is the author's labor—not some abstract concept of artistic originality or aesthetic novelty—that makes a poem. And yet Berrigan is not willing to make the mere fact of production the sole determinant of literary value, either, and in this sense he diverges from Tzara's dada aesthetic, as he does from Conte's notion of postmodern proceduralism. If, as in sonnet XXI, an assembly-line collage procedure will not say quite what Berrigan wants to say, he will impose himself more directly on the text. He will cheat or deviate from the procedure in order to achieve a desired aesthetic end. Or, to be more accurate, divergence is encoded within the procedure itself. The author may approach the status of an assembly line worker, but at the same time he retains the ability to make intuitive modifications to the material coming down the line.

If Berrigan's procedural method owes something to dada, his conception of the sonnet form derives from the Elizabethan tradition. In his "Sonnet Workshop," transcribed in On the Level Everyday, Berrigan names Shakespeare as an influence on his understanding of the
sonnet (82). He also notes that his decision to treat his own sonnets as a sequence was partly determined by his reading of Shakespeare (86). Now, for an Anglophone sonneteer to claim the influence of Shakespeare is, on its face, relatively insignificant. The majority of sonnets written in English since the seventeenth century probably owe something—directly or indirectly—to Shakespeare’s poetry. But Berrigan’s own absorption of the Shakespearean tone was far from a passive act of osmosis. On the contrary, he seems to have invented his own procedure for constructing a Shakespearean influence:

When I was reading Shakespeare’s sonnets over and over, I found three or four that I liked very much and I typed them up. I had a desk, a long desk, which came from a Chinese restaurant. It had some shelves coming out about this far, and I scotch taped about four of Shakespeare’s sonnets on the shelf, and I sat at my desk all the time, whether I was reading or writing or whatever, and I read them all the time until that music was in my head. And then, at the same time, I wrote some very specific imitations of Shakespeare sonnets, one which begins “Shall I compare thee to a baseball bat . . . .” and actually carries that conceit, consistently all the way through the poem, which amazes me because it’s not the kind of thing I do. In my imitation I tried to stick very close to rhyme and meter. I tried to use the same kind of rhyme scheme. I tried to use the exact meter, but I didn’t know exactly what the exact meter was, I only knew what certain people said the exact meter was and I didn’t have the confidence that I have now to know that they were wrong, that the meter varies and changes all the time. I wrote quite a number of those, but at some point I began to write other kinds of works as well. And some of those other kinds of works later got into The Sonnets, and got in there whole because I didn’t change them at all. They weren’t sonnets, and they were influenced by everything else I was doing too. (“Everyday” 90)

This process of absorbing the Shakespearean sonnet is of interest for several reasons. First, there is something of a class issue involved, especially in the way that Berrigan narrates his own acquisition of the form. Rifkin mentions Berrigan’s construction of a “pop persona,” a performance in which he plays the role of “working-class high artist” who is “part ingenu, part impresario” (110), and he is certainly in character in describing his
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apprenticeship to the Shakespearean sonnet. The ostensible aim of his autodidactic fixation is the appropriation of a Shakespearean tone or “music,” but access to the Bard’s tone is mediated by “certain people” who insist that a sonnet must follow a regular metrical pattern. Presumably, these unnamed authorities are erudite and are in a position to make a young poet fresh out of Oklahoma and the U.S. Army feel inadequate to the task of writing in Elizabethan metrics. However, Rifkin is right to suggest that Berrigan’s naïveté is performative. He had in fact done graduate work in literature at the University of Tulsa, and, as Notley indicates, his “occasional I-am-a-half-assed-minor-practitioner act” is just that—an act (Preface vii).

Berrigan’s description of reading and rewriting Shakespeare reveals an interesting aspect of his understanding of the relationship between form and content. For Berrigan, form is always primary, and content is of secondary importance. As Charles Bernstein explains, Berrigan “built his edifice on the wreck of the old—using its broken shards to build a structure with altogether different architectural principles” (Content 277). Once the redesigned architectural structure is in place, the content will follow. Having internalized the form of the Shakespearean sonnet, Berrigan can reconstruct individual poems in his own way, using whatever material is available, even his own previously written sonnets. At times, as Kane points out, Berrigan’s use of recycled content seems to undermine his textual identity. His “consistent use of appropriation, cutup, and pastiche” causes us to “lose a sense of Berrigan as stable individual voice—instead, he becomes a figure absorbed in and by other people’s writing” (Kane 110). Or, as Bernstein argues, “The Sonnets—with its permutational use of the same phrases in different sequences and its inclusion of external or found language—stands as an explicit rejection of the psychological ‘I’ as the locus of the poem’s meaning” (Content 277).

Kane and Bernstein are both correct in terms of the effect of Berrigan’s poems on the reader. It is difficult to find Berrigan’s “voice” within The Sonnets. Yet, as I have been arguing, it is precisely his use of cutup and collage that marks the language of The Sonnets as his—as the product of his labor. There may be no “psychological ‘I’” or “stable individual voice” in the sequence, but there is most certainly an idiosyncratic intelligence producing and reproducing itself through the textual assemblage of the poem. To return to Jameson’s understanding of the function of modern poetry, one might say that Berrigan’s procedural form “reasserts its production of language and reinvents a center” (Reader 118). This “center” is unstable and shifting in Berrigan’s work, but it is there nonetheless.
One recognizes in the form itself a certain way of working—a certain way of producing language—and so procedure becomes the center of identity in the text, and Berrigan’s unmethodical method becomes his poetic signature.

“Very interesting results”

As we have seen, Berrigan’s method of textual pastiche manifests his individual labor. But it also serves a more collective function. As Berrigan negotiates the constraints inherent in his procedural form, he simultaneously calls attention to the constraints under which many other postindustrial Americans labored (and continue to labor) each day. This is not to say that Berrigan’s work merely allegorizes larger conditions of production. Rather, I would argue, Berrigan consciously composed his poetry within restrictions typical of the postindustrial workplace. Using Jameson’s notion of transcoding, we can analyze the labor conditions encoded in Berrigan’s formal procedure. In order to do this, a bit of historical context will be necessary. In the early-to-mid 1960s, when Berrigan began writing his sonnet sequence, the United States was making the transition from an industrial to a postindustrial economy. This transition profoundly affected American labor. In this new economy, mental labor began to replace manual labor as the dominant mode of work:

In the two decades after 1950, 9 million jobs opened up for secondary-school teachers, hospital support staff, and local government office workers…. Meanwhile, new white-collar jobs were created in almost every large corporation. Hundreds of thousands of supervisors and personnel managers were hired to control workers and keep unions out of these workplaces. Millions more were assigned to planning, advertising, sales, and public relations. Finance, real estate, and insurance companies added 4 million new workers in the twenty years after 1950.

In 1956, for the first time in U.S. history, white-collar workers outnumbered blue-collar workers. (Bensman 517–518)

But even as the white-collar sector was growing, the nature of the labor performed by this sector was changing. Instead of occupying a privileged place in the labor hierarchy, mental work in the new economy
was becoming increasingly automated and menial: “The greatest growth in so-called white-collar employment came in the categories labeled sales and clerical work. These jobs might be white collar in the sense that a typist did not spot-weld body joints. But most clerical and sales jobs had little creative or autonomous content” (Bensman 518–519). Furthermore, these new white-collar positions were not free of physical labor. In Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century (1974), Harry Braverman suggests that, in fact, mental labor necessarily involves some form of manual production, and that the more creative, conceptual aspects of mental labor may be divided from more automated physical processes:

The typical, although not exclusive, product of mental labor consists of markings on paper. Mental labor is carried on in the brain, but since it takes form in an external product—symbols in linguistic, numeric, or other representational forms—it involves manual operations such as writing, drawing, operating writing machines, etc.—for the purpose of bringing this product into being. It is therefore possible to separate the functions of conception and execution: all that is required is that the scale of the work be large enough to make this subdivision economical for the corporation. (316)

Thus, in a postindustrial society, a widespread new form of clerical labor emerges that is subservient to more conceptual forms of mental labor. Typing and thinking both go into the production of a document, but these tasks need not be performed by the same person. In short, large segments of mental labor fall to the province of the working class, and the designation “white collar” no longer automatically implies social privilege.

Although I do not want to suggest that, as a poet, Berrigan was a part of this new clerical working class, both his biography and his poetry make clear that he was enmeshed in the same postindustrial conditions of production that gave rise to this class. After moving from Oklahoma to New York in the early ‘60s, Berrigan made a living for a time by composing essays for students at Columbia University (Foster 31). Though providing plagiarism on demand is a somewhat atypical example of mental labor, it certainly fits within the larger trend toward a service economy. The poet’s facility with language becomes a commodity to be purchased by college students, and—presumably—the precondition for
Poetry, then, should be more than an avocation. And to the extent that poetry is indeed a “job,” it will necessarily be implicated in the same conditions of production that govern other forms of postindustrial labor. Although we might want to dispute the notion that poetry is “a 24-hour-a-day job” (a 24-hour “shift” as a poet is clearly not comparable to a commensurate shift as an administrative assistant), this concept of writing poetry as a profession is intriguing in the present context. If being a poet is a job, it must involve labor. As Braverman explains, “Labor in general is a process whose determinate forms are shaped by the end result, the product” (316). In other words, the point of labor is to produce something. The point of the mental labor involved in poetry is to make poems. In Berrigan’s procedural method, we find the same sort of intellectual automation that we find in other forms of postindustrial mental labor. Retyping lines of poetry according to a predetermined formula is, in many ways, remarkably similar to typing form letters or filling out paperwork. Similar to the office worker, the poet is making mechanical substitutions or variations within a given framework. As we have seen, Berrigan manipulates the process at will. He never wholly abdicates his authorial agency. But his reliance on a semiautomated method is telling in and of itself. The “job” of poet, it seems, requires the negotiation (or rejection) of formulaic mental processes, just like any other occupation in the postindustrial workplace. Of course, it would be grossly reductive to read one of Berrigan’s sonnets in the same way that we read a form letter from an insurance company. But at the same time, it is important to recognize the ways in which Berrigan’s formal procedure registers more generalized postindustrial working conditions. In connecting Berrigan’s postmodern proceduralism to contemporaneous forms of mental labor, I do not mean to suggest that Berrigan is consciously emulating office
work. Rather, I mean to perform a Jamesonian transcoding operation, which involves “the invention of a set of terms, the strategic choice of a particular code or language, such that the same terminology can be used to analyze and articulate two quite distinct types of objects or ‘texts,’ or two very different structural levels of reality” (Unconscious 40). In this case, labor takes place at both the cultural level (procedural poetry) and the economic level (postindustrial capitalism). What unites these two levels, I would suggest, is Lukács’s notion of a “structure of consciousness.”

Just as a gothic cathedral tells us something of the medieval European structure of consciousness, Berrigan’s sonnet-assemblages tell us something about the mindset of American workers in the middle of the last century. We might conclude that postindustrial mental processes had become unnaturally mechanistic and fragmented, but “natural” is relative. For Berrigan, proceduralism produced poems that exactly represented him.

In the remaining pages of this chapter, I will turn to the beginning of The Sonnets, for the first five poems function as a repository of raw material to which Berrigan often has recourse. To study the textual recycling of these five poems is, in a sense, to study the entire sonnet sequence in microcosm. In a journal entry from November 20, 1962, Berrigan describes the composition of the first five sonnets, and his description provides a sense of his procedure throughout:

Wrote (?) (Made) five sonnets tonight, by taking one line from each of a group of poems, at random, going from first to last poem then back again until 12 lines, then making the final couplet from any 2 poems, in the group, one line at random from each. Wrote by ear, and automatically. Very interesting results.

Groups used
Sonnet # 1—Six poems 1962
   # 2—Personal Poems
   # 3—Le Bateau Ivre
   # 4—My 14 Selected Poems
   # 5—My 10 Newest Poems
All this was partly inspired by reading about DADA but mostly inspired by my activities along the same line for the past 10 months (or since reading LOCUS SOLUS TWO & seeing the Assemblage Show & Working on Collages with Joe (see our Self-Portrait)
Now back to more Dada. (CP 668)
The ambiguity at the center of Berrigan’s method is very much in evidence here. His construction of the first five sonnets is either an act of writing or an act of making—of assemblage—and the inspiration for it comes both from Dada and from the first generation New York School poets, via the magazine *Locus Solus*. (“Joe” is clearly the poet and visual artist Joe Brainard, Berrigan’s friend and collaborator.) Moreover, Berrigan describes working “at random,” “by ear,” and “automatically,” all three being substantially different and even contradictory procedures. Working randomly—using an aleatory method—would evidently preclude working by ear, which entails an intentional arrangement. Working automatically suggests the surrealist method of automatic writing, in this case modified to become a form of automatic assemblage. Whether or not such a method could be said to tap into the unconscious, it is not a means to achieve chance. Evidently, Berrigan’s method does not add up to an internally consistent means of working; rather, it is a flexible, intuitive procedure for generating new poems out of older textual material. It also provides a nearly inexhaustible means of production, since one can always rearrange previously used material. The last batch of poems can always become the raw textual material for the next cutup-and-collage process. In the case of the first five sonnets, the fact that Berrigan assembled them all in one night probably has something to do with their usefulness as source material. Though the poems are fragmented, the impulse behind them feels spontaneous and cohesive. As the comment “Very interesting results” suggests, Berrigan knew he was onto something.

There is a certain irony in Berrigan’s use of procedural form, in that—as with Tzara’s newspaper poem—Berrigan achieves originality precisely by submitting to an automated labor process. As we have seen, the process is not entirely based on chance, and so it is not simply the abdication of authorial agency that appealed to Berrigan. Rather, it seems that the appeal of the procedure had something to do with the speed with which it allowed Berrigan to work. Here is his description of the method employed to turn source material (the six poems from 1962) into cutup sonnets:

I took these six poems and put them next to the typewriter and started typing up one line from the first one, one line from the second and so on until I had six lines. Then I went backwards doing the same thing, through the six again until I had twelve lines. By then I knew what the last two lines would be. I was going after the sonnet, as you
can see, and I picked the lines by quick choice. I mean, I knew the poems thoroughly, I’d written them, I’d worked on them, I knew them through, I picked them by very quick choice, almost random chance. Not really though, I mean there’s no such thing, and from those six poems I managed to make seven sonnets, and it scared me, I mean they came so easily and they seemed quite good. They were like nothing I’d seen before, but the rawness and the roughness of them seemed to me to be just like me. (Talking 25–26)

Berrigan is careful to emphasize that volition is constrained by the speed of the procedure. He works “by quick choice” and even “by very quick choice, almost random chance.” The result is that “the rawness and the roughness” of the new cutup poems reflect the personality of the poet. And herein lie the irony and the interest of Berrigan’s method: By using an automated process of mental labor that would foreclose creativity in most work settings, Berrigan leaves his unique creative signature on the product of his labor. His form simultaneously lays bare the automation of postindustrial labor and challenges it as well. In short, he derives his poetic signature from the very process of mental mechanization.

The similarity between Berrigan’s method and Braverman’s description of postindustrial office work is striking. Like Berrigan as he writes sonnets, office workers use a semiautonomous labor process that lends itself to speed:

In the clerical routine of offices, the use of the brain is never entirely done away with—any more than it is entirely done away with in any form of manual work. The mental processes are rendered repetitious and routine, or they are reduced to so small a factor in the work process that the speed and dexterity with which the manual portion of the operation can be performed dominates the labor process as a whole. More than this cannot be said of any manual labor process, and once it is true of clerical labor, labor in that form is placed on an equal footing with the simpler forms of so-called blue-collar manual labor. (325)

The conceptual complexity of Berrigan’s avant-garde process differentiates it in some respects from the labor processes employed by a typist or a data-entry clerk. That said, Berrigan’s method is “repetitious and
"routine," and it does facilitate “speed and dexterity” in the cutup / collage process. And, at a more fundamental level, the “manual portion of the operation” will be similar for both Berrigan and a clerical laborer. Both sit in front of a typewriter, typing and retyping. Given the mechanical nature of the new mental labor, and given the incorporation into this labor of manual processes such as typing, Braverman concludes that distinctions between blue- and white-collar labor are anachronistic in the postindustrial era: “For this reason, the traditional distinctions between ‘manual’ and ‘white-collar’ labor, which are so thoughtlessly and widely used in the literature on this subject, represent echoes of a past situation which has virtually ceased to have meaning in the modern world of work” (325–326). We can draw a further conclusion as it relates to poetry. Procedural form, as employed by Berrigan, erases “traditional distinctions” between literary and clerical labor. The poet interposes mechanized, clerical working processes between himself and his own purportedly creative, individualistic artistic production. This interposition calls attention to labor across the social totality, whether in the realm of poetry or in the office. Or, in Jameson’s language, Berrigan’s method invites us to “explore the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts” (Unconscious 20). In the method of The Sonnets, then, we can see a socially symbolic act: the application of the constraints inherent in postindustrial labor to postmodern poetic production.

In addition to social symbolism, Berrigan’s method also results in a sequence of cultural artifacts that are fascinating in their own right. Sonnet I, for example, introduces a series of arcane and vaguely ancient images that seem to exist on the threshold of intelligibility. Readers encounter an unnamed figure wearing a “piercing pince-nez” in line one, and in line two we find “a dim frieze, in the dark night” (TS 1). The poem goes on to present a highly symbolic, ritualized world where “ox-blood” seems to drip “from the hands which play / For fire for warmth for hands for growth” (1). It is a romanticized, monumental world in which the assembled images suggest art, craftsmanship, and the passage of time. Someone—perhaps the figure wearing the pince-nez—is buried in a “structured tomb,” yet “dance” and “architecture” apparently live on (1). In the penultimate line of the poem, the monumental past subsumes the present, as an unspecified “We” become “the sleeping fragments of his sky” (1). Ultimately, the poem appears to be memorializing someone, and—given the emphasis on fragmentation and antiquarian artifice—we should not be too surprised to learn that Berrigan
had Ezra Pound in mind. According to Notley, Berrigan “often said that the unnamed figure in this sonnet is Ezra Pound” (TS 79). However, extratextual references to Pound do us little good when the first line of sonnet I (“His piercing pince-nez. Some dim frieze”) is repeated in the very different context of sonnet XLVIII: “Francis Marion / Muscles down in tooth-clenched strides toward / The effort regulator: His piercing pince-nez / Some dim frieze in ‘The Poems’ and these go on without me” (TS 45). While Pound is wearing the pince-nez in sonnet I, in this new context it belongs to Francis Marion, a hero of the American Revolutionary War. In and of itself, this textually circulating “pince-nez” is somewhat absurd, and it is even more so if one pictures it perched on the nose of a colonial soldier as he “strides toward” what sounds like some sort of odd medical apparatus—an “effort regulator.” The incongruity of the image calls attention to the collage procedure itself, which inevitably produces weird juxtapositions and disjunctive enjambments. Lines from sonnet I will also be reproduced in lines eight and nine of sonnet LXXI, where all obvious connections to Pound and Francis Marion have disappeared: “too soon for the broken arm. Hands point to a dim frieze / in the dark night. Wind giving presence to fragments” (TS 63). Through the process of repetition and recontextualization, these lines begin to function primarily as signifiers of collage procedure itself, rather than as references to any particular content.

In sonnet II, Berrigan’s use of collage is both more obvious and more jarring than it is in sonnet I. Sonnet II makes reference to specific times of day, and the abrupt transitions between morning and night suggest a sense of disorientation and temporal distortion. As the poem begins, “It is 5:15 a.m.” (TS 2). Suddenly, in line four, “It’s 8:30 p.m. in New York”; the poet has “been running around all day” (2). Then line twelve repeats line two, and once again “It is 5:15 a.m.” (2). The reader scarcely has time to assimilate the inevitable sense of déjà vu before another abrupt shift occurs in line thirteen: “fucked til 7 now she’s late to work” (2). These various temporal disjunctions both foreground Berrigan’s cutup method and reinforce the subject matter of the poem, which seems, at least in part, to deal with drug use. The poet references “17 and 1/2 milligrams” of some unnamed substance in line eleven, and by the final line of the poem the poet discovers that his “hands” are “shaking” and worries that he “should know better” (2). Thus, the frenetic pace suggested by the poem’s compressed narrative and rapid time shifts may be mimetic of an amphetamine-addled consciousness. In any case, the use of collage form in sonnet II is not subtle. The references to “scotch-tape” and
"a notebook" in line ten recall the manual, material process of writing, and perhaps of appropriation as well. One can imagine the poet taping another text into his notebook, and in fact this is—metaphorically—what Berrigan does in line six, which features a rather loud appropriation from a poem in Ashbery’s The Tennis Court Oath (1957). Titled “How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher . . .”, Ashbery’s poem begins with the question: “How much longer will I be able to inhabit the divine sepulcher / Of life, my great love?” (25). In Ashbery’s poem, the hyperbolic existential angst of the line seems lightly ironic; in Berrigan’s sonnet, this irony is literally cut off. Line six of sonnet II reads, “How Much Longer Shall I Be Able To Inhabit The Divine,” and even a reader unfamiliar with Ashbery’s poem will probably sense that there is a noun missing at the end, particularly considering the fact that the next line begins “and the day is bright gray” (TS 2). Yet there remains an implicit irony in Berrigan’s decision to appropriate Ashbery’s work, in that Ashbery is a pioneer of collage procedure in postmodern American poetry. For example, “Europe,” from The Tennis Court Oath, “is mostly a ‘cup-up’ of author William Le Queux’s Beryl of the Bi-Planes, a World War I-era girl’s book Ashbery ‘picked up by accident on one of the quais of Paris’” (Sweet 250). Berrigan is appropriating an appropriator, in other words. He is not so much dismantling Ashbery’s tone as he is enfolding Ashbery’s postmodern play into his own. In the context of Ashbery’s poem, the line “How much longer will I be able to inhabit the divine sepulcher” already feels like a pastiche of high romanticism. Berrigan just adds his signature and moves on.

Sonnet III is (sequentially) Berrigan’s first reworking of Arthur Rimbaud’s “Le bateau ivre,” and his adaptation remains close in tone to the French adolescent’s declarative, self-dramatizing language. The first line of sonnet III, “Stronger than alcohol, more great than song,” corresponds more or less to Rimbaud’s “Plus fortes que l’alcool, plus vastes que nos lyres” (“Stronger than alcohol, more vast than our lyres” [295]); the first sentence of line six, “It’s true, I weep too much,” approximates “Mais, vrai, j’ai trop pleuré!” (“But, true, I have cried too much!” [297]); “slow kisses on the eyelids of the sea,” the seventh line of Berrigan’s sonnet, gestures toward “Baiser montant aux yeux des mers avec lenteurs” (“Kiss ascending to the eyes of the seas slowly” [295]); line eight, “what other men sometimes have thought they’ve seen,” is a nearly literal translation of “Et j’ai vu quelquefois ce que l’homme a cru voir!” (295); line nine, “And since then I’ve been bathing in the poem,” translates precisely “Et dès lors, je me suis baigné dans le Poème” (294); and finally line
fourteen, “and fall on my knees then, womanly,” preserves the French near rhyme of “qu’une” / “genoux” (“Et je restais, ainsi qu’une femme à genoux”; “And I remained, like a woman on her knees” [296]) using the English near rhyme “knees” / “womanly.” Lines one, eight, and nine will be repeated in sonnet LXX, which is explicitly “after Arthur Rimbaud,” and line eight (“what other men sometimes have thought they’ve seen”) will further shift from the final line of sonnet LXX to the second line of LXXI (TS 62). Such shifting of contexts is important for what it reveals about Berrigan’s procedure. Over the course of the sequence, Rimbaud’s “Le bateau ivre” gradually becomes an important and even an integral part of The Sonnets. Through the combined process of translation and collage—which is to say the process of literary production—Rimbaud’s lines become Berrigan’s raw material. The previous context for the lines becomes The Sonnets rather than “Le bateau ivre,” and the residual semantic value that these lines retain comes from their deployment within Berrigan’s sequence, as much as from their original context. In short, the appropriated material becomes thoroughly intertextual, and Berrigan’s use of the sonnet form reinforces this effect. “Le bateau ivre” is composed of 100 lines divided into quatrains. In The Sonnets, Rimbaud’s lines only appear within Berrigan’s sonnet form, thus distancing them from their source. In the act of condensing, Berrigan already begins the process of inscribing his authorship on the Rimbaldden content. As Rimbaud’s language becomes more and more marked by Berrigan’s collage process, it seems more and more to become Berrigan’s own.

Sonnet IV also begins with a poetry translation. The first line of Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Herbsttag” (“Autumn Day”) reads “Herr: es ist Zeit. Der Sommer war sehr groß” (“Lord: it is time. The huge summer has gone by”) (10–11). Berrigan’s sonnet begins with a fairly close rendering of Rilke’s line: “Lord, it is time. Summer was very great” (TS 4). The Rilke quotation is followed by various other literary allusions. The reference to “Brooklyn Bridge” in line four inevitably recalls Hart Crane’s epic depiction of this structure in The Bridge (1930), while the “butterfly” of line six distantly echoes the “papillon de mai” of “Le bateau ivre” (TS 4, Rimbaud 298). “Nijinsky” in line twelve is, first of all, a reference to Russian choreographer and dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, and it is also a possible allusion to another allusion: W. H. Auden’s mention of Nijinsky in the poem “September 1, 1939.” The seeming randomness of these allusions undoubtedly owes something to Berrigan’s method, which places disparate images and references within the same lexical field. But in this particular sonnet, perhaps the most interesting trace of
Berrigan’s procedure is to be found in line eight, which appears as follows in the poem:

I often think sweet and sour pork” (TS 4)

The decontextualized reference to Americanized Chinese food is incongruous and potentially funny in its own right. It almost seems as though the poet’s yen for takeout has interrupted the writing itself. More importantly, though, the closing quotation at the end of this line comes as something of a shock. Upon reaching the end of line eight, one wonders if one has missed the opening quotation mark. This closing quotation mark projects itself backward on the preceding lines, as though they must all be part of the same monologic discourse. But as it turns out, there is no opening mark. The closing quotation mark merely exists as the material residue of Berrigan’s cutup process. In some prior text, this reference to “sweet and sour pork” probably appeared at the end of a quotation. But here, the mark signifies not so much direct speech as the method itself. In fact, throughout The Sonnets the inconsistent capitalization at the beginning of lines and the erratic punctuation remind the reader of Berrigan’s textual recycling. There is even something slightly stubborn about unnecessary punctuation. It foregrounds the fact that fidelity to procedure trumps legibility. The quotation mark in line eight is there simply because it was there, and not because it helps the reader distinguish reported speech. Of course, it is worth reiterating here that Berrigan’s fidelity to his cutup-and-collage method has limits. One suspects that he would have removed the dangling quotation mark if it had bothered him on the aesthetic (rather than conceptual) level.

Of the first five sonnets, the fifth is arguably the most resistant to explication. I would be hard put to explain what sonnet V is about, yet I would not hesitate to call it one of the most interesting of The Sonnets as well. The scarcity of end-stops and the disjuncture between lines contribute to a kind of manic effect. The poem seems to undergo a radical shift at almost every line break, and one has the general sense of thought outthinking itself, of thought moving too fast for its own mechanisms. In the transition from the first line to the second, for example, language seems to fail the poet, as he (or someone) goes from “Squawking” to “forgetting” to crying out with the neological exclamation “Hawkaaaaaaaaaa!” (TS 5). In line three, “stars” are compared to “nightmares,” and both terms are compared to “a crucifix” (5). As in sonnet I, the imagery seems vaguely symbolic, but there are no contextual clues to help us interpret
the symbols. In line four, the poet wonders aloud about his French proficiency (“Why can’t I read French?”), a question that seems relatively pertinent in light of the extensive engagement with Rimbaud in sonnet III (5). Line six, which features “babies . . . waving their innocent flags,” reappears in the unnumbered poem “From a Secret Journal,” which begins, “My babies parade waving their innocent flags” (5, 9). For their part, “The ‘jeunes filles’ so rare” of line nine—perhaps an allusion to Marcel Proust’s A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs (1919), the second volume of A la recherche du temps perdu—put in an additional appearance in sonnet LXXXIII, though the phrase is enjambed across two lines in this latter sonnet: “flinging currents into pouring streams The ‘Jeunes filles’ / so rare” (5, 65). And the reference to “Perceval” in the final line of sonnet V perhaps invokes Richard Wagner’s last opera, Parsifal (1882), and, more generally, the Grail legend’s enduring importance for modern poets like Paul Verlaine and T. S. Eliot. That “Perceval! Perceval!” is repeated “all day” may be a subtle critique of the tediousness of high cultural pretense (5). But as with the rest of The Sonnets, chasing down the allusions in sonnet V does not explain the overall effect of the poem, which—by way of visual analogy—I would compare to the effect of rapidly changing channels on the television. From each line we glean an image or two (“Squawking,” “stars,” “flags,” etc.), and the sequence of images simultaneously invites and repels attempts to construct a coherent narrative. Yet—至少 for this reader—the disjunction of the lines ultimately results in something that, in the context of a fragmented, spectacular culture, feels fundamentally authentic.

By now, it will be evident that in The Sonnets Berrigan employs a procedural form that allows for intuition and volition within a formulaic structure. Although an argument could be made for dismissing Berrigan’s method as a nonprocedure, a sort of semiregulated writing practice that adheres to no particular constraints, such a dismissal would require an overly narrow definition of procedural form. In her essay “Rules and Restraints in Women’s Experimental Writing,” Carla Harryman explains that, in her own writing, “the rule is the rule of thought, not of literary convention. This rule of thought is the convention on which the experimental work relies and what the experimental work cannot question without destroying itself. This rule of thought or intellectual position is then what allows the difficult text to come into being at all” (117). For Berrigan, the “rule” that seems to govern The Sonnets can best be summarized in one word: manipulation. To create poetry, one has to leave one’s individual mark or signature on the language, and to do this
requires not original lines but handling, arrangement, engagement, and rearrangement. Repetition, permutation, collage, quotation, and translation are not acts of *ex nihilo* creation; rather they are a manipulation (etymologically, a work of the hands) performed on already existing text. And as with other forms of postindustrial, white-collar labor, Berrigan’s mental labor involves a concomitant manual process—in this case typing and retyping lines of poetry. On the literal level, his manipulations leave a trace of the author’s presence, just as a signature leaves a trace of the human hand. What makes a text one’s own, *The Sonnets* suggests, is the evidence of one’s labor—the trace of human contact, of human production—that assemblage leaves on it. What differentiates one sonnet from another is not simply different content—as we have seen, Berrigan’s sonnets sometimes have nearly identical content—but the arrangement of that content. Otherwise said, it is the process of production and reproduction that makes a poem. While labor processes such as typing and redaction generally disappear into the anonymous, alienated world of postindustrial consumer culture, Berrigan’s procedural method calls attention to these very processes. The form of *The Sonnets* reminds us that—however automated and mediated it may appear—postindustrial production still depends on people and their labor. Someone remains behind the keyboard or typewriter, working.
In the last chapter, we saw that Ted Berrigan’s *Sonnets* (1964) manifests a critique of the reification of language and labor in postindustrial capitalist society, and that this critique occurs primarily at the level of formal procedure. In David Antin’s poetry of the late 1960s, sociocultural criticism is more direct. In fact, Antin’s experimental poetry from the Vietnam War era deals quite openly with pressing political realities. In “the marchers” (1968), for example, Antin depicts a group of protesters carrying a coffin and “walking together” so that “they will not feel all alone” (*SP* 30). In “who are my friends” (1968), he calls into question the American rationale for continued involvement in Vietnam. Other poems such as “a list of the delusions of the insane / what they are afraid of” (1968) and “W.S. Male” (1968), though not directly partisan, offer an implicit social critique by pointing to a vague, generalized sense of unease, a fear of having “committed suicide of the soul” (40) or of “being dominated” (43). Antin’s critical stance toward cold war American culture and values places him at a remove from Berrigan’s pop sensibility, and yet his skeptical individualism is also far from Ron Silliman’s committed Marxism. In metaphorical terms, it seems that Antin prefers watching the marchers to joining them. Thus, on the ideological spectrum of this study, he represents a middle ground, neither indifferent nor radical.

Antin’s use of procedural form is as individualistic as his politics. In many ways, his proceduralism is the least constrained of the four poets
in this book. While Berrigan ties his experimentation to the sonnet form and a semiformulaic “method,” and Silliman and Lyn Hejinian employ numerical constraints, Antin’s procedures tend to be largely intuitive. The primary constraint in much of his experimental writing is simply the use of readymade language. He tends to rewrite found texts in order to critique their implicit ideologies, or to highlight hegemonic ideologies more generally. This mode of poetic production begins with consumption (in this case consumption of a text), and it is by way of consumption that Antin approaches the question of labor. If, as Guy Debord argues, consumption is just one more burden placed upon the alienated laborer, then Antin’s work provides an example of the rejection of this burden. He will not passively consume the texts of the culture industry, or even the texts of modernist high culture. Rather, he uses readymade text as a means to his own poetic output. Like Berrigan’s manipulation and rearrangement of older poems, Antin’s collage procedure involves a direct interaction with the material real, a consumption and re-production of the textual material that supersaturates everyday life. This inversion of consumption and production is evident in Antin’s “The Black Plague.”

The language of “The Black Plague” is charged with pain. First published in definitions (1967), the four-part poem functions as an extended meditation on the fragility of the human body and the inadequacy of language to express this vulnerability. Unaffected, clinical references to “a demonstration of bones cut through by a saw” or “a demonstration of bones and intestines” (SP 77) contrast with stark allusions to the subjective experience of pain (“28 muscles at the root of the tongue / fashion a scream” [81]) and to the philosophical implications of suffering (“what would it be like if we never gave any outward signs of / pain didnt groan grimace and so on we couldn’t teach a / child the use of the word ‘toothache’” [85]). But Antin’s work is never only about the ostensible content; it is always also about formal procedure. At the end of the poem, he includes a parenthetical note that initiates a reconsideration of the preceding text: “Part III of the Black Plague is pretty much an arrangement of words taken from a translation of Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations” (93).1 Thus, lines such as “supposing i closed my eyes and turned to stone / i turn to stone my pains go on are they still pains” (90) function not only as a poet’s meditation on the relationship between language and phenomenology; these lines also implicitly pose the question, is this readymade language still a poem? Otherwise put, will Wittgenstein’s language work
for a writer the second time around? The second half of Antin’s endnote suggests that it will, precisely because it is no longer Wittgenstein’s language: “About the words, nobody owns them—not Wittgenstein, or the translator, or me—and anyone who wants them is welcome to use them again” (93).

Antin’s parenthesis reveals one of the fundamental concerns of his poetry from the 1960s and early ’70s: the communicative potential of recycled or readymade language. To readers who are only casually familiar with his work, Antin’s engagement with readymade texts may seem out of character. Most critical accounts of his poetry focus on the “talk poems” that he began to compose in the early 1970s. These talk poems are essentially a hybrid between performance art and poetry, in that Antin improvises and records them in front of an audience, and only later transcribes them for print. He has worked prolifically in this mode, and talk-poem collections like *talking at the boundaries* (1976), *tuning* (1984), *what it means to be avant-garde* (1993), and *i never knew what time it was* (2005)—composed over the course of four decades—have cemented his reputation as a genre-defying performer and a key figure in the postmodern American avant-garde. In light of his extensive and successful engagement with a poetics of oral performance, it is easy to overlook his earlier poetic experiments (collected in *Selected Poems: 1963–1973*), or to read these early poems as teleologically oriented toward the later talk poems. But Antin’s poetic output from the 1960s and early ’70s represents more than a foreshadowing of later performance work. His experimentation with readymade language is part of a broader investigation of consumer culture that took place within American poetry and painting in the middle of the last century.

Antin’s radical exploration of readymade language started in 1963, when he “began to experiment with a poetry made up entirely of strings of clichés collaged from newspapers, detective novels, technical books, insurance manuals, grammars, dictionaries, and other sources of banal and used-up language to find out whether it was possible to arrive at the new and significant through the use of the old and trivial” (Antin, “Postmodernism?” 131). As primary influences on his collage work—first published in the collections *autobiography* (1967), *definitions* (1967), *code of flag behavior* (1968), *meditations* (1971), and *talking* (1972)—he cites not poetry’s high modernists but Jackson Mac Low, John Cage, and “the rich example of the New York art world,” including Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Allan Kaprow, Öyvind Fahlström, and Claes Oldenburg (131). As this list
suggests, Antin’s early poetics is concerned with issues of production and consumption, with the idea of reproduction and the status of the objet d’art in a postindustrial world. Rauschenberg’s combine paintings provide a useful analogue to Antin’s attempt “to arrive at the new and significant through the use of the old and trivial,” in that Rauschenberg uses readymade materials as serious compositional devices that move beyond a dadaistic provocation toward an avant-garde painting praxis that is itself “new and significant.” For instance, in Rauschenberg’s *Buffalo II* (1964), a duplicated image of John F. Kennedy’s right hand “sets up a rhythm across the canvas quite unlike the compositional effects of earlier art” (Archer 11). Such an effect is rather different from that produced by Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), for example, wherein a urinal is presented as an art object without the mediation of artistic design or labor (save for a signature and the act of presentation itself). Like Antin’s collage poetry, Rauschenberg’s combine integrates readymade materials into a larger artistic framework rather than presenting the readymade as a finished product in its own right.

The minimalist and conceptual art movements of the 1960s also provide useful analogues to Antin’s early poetic praxis. Around the time that Antin was engaging with readymade language, minimalist artists like Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and Anne Truitt were redefining American art by using prefabricated industrial materials in their sculptures and installations: “Often produced in workshops according to the artist’s plans, or built of temporary arrangements of industrially made units, the new work evinced a ‘minimum’ of artistic labor” (Meyer 3). Despite obvious differences between the manipulation of found text and the manipulation of heavy industrial materials, the concepts behind the two methods are similar. Whether reconstructing readymade text or building art installations out of aluminum, steel, and spray paint, the artist is still assembling more than creating. When Andre stacks up wood blocks for his *Timber Piece (Well)* (1964) or Flavin arranges neon tubes into his *Monument for Tatlin* (1966), these arrangements serve as a formal homology for Antin’s own rearrangement of the products of the cultural industry.

Conceptual art, which “offer[s] a bridge between the verbal and the visual,” is arguably even closer to Antin’s work (Lippard x). The verbal-visual link is often apparent in a given work’s title, in that titles initiate the process of interpretation and, frequently, direct the viewer’s attention to the conceptual discourse informing the work. Hence, within the American conceptual art movement of the 1960s, one encounters
an exhibition organized by Mel Bochner entitled *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art* (1966), or John Baldessari’s *Everything is Purged…* (1966–1967), a painting on which the following (apparently ironic) words are printed in block letters: “EVERYTHING IS PURGED FROM THIS PAINTING BUT ART, NO IDEAS HAVE ENTERED THIS WORK.” As Lucy R. Lippard explains, conceptual art “means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and / or ‘dematerialized’” (vii). This dematerialized art often presents itself as an “attack on the notion of originality, ‘the artist’s touch,’ and the competitive aspects of individual style,” as well as “an attack on the genius theory, the hitherto most cherished aspect of patriarchal, ruling-class art” (xiv). While Antin does not dismiss individual creativity, he most certainly challenges the notion that the basic materials of art must be produced *ex nihilo* by an individual genius. After all, as he puts it, “About the words, nobody owns them… and anyone who wants them is welcome to use them again” (*SP* 93).

Of course, Antin is not the only poet to have benefited from the example of the art world during “the great explosion of American poetry” in the 1960s (Antin, “Modernism” 132). But if Antin’s later talk poems have something of a sui generis quality to them, I would argue that his literary collage work displays an equally radical inventiveness that leads to an implicit reevaluation of poetic praxis. Like Cage and Mac Low, he invented writing procedures on a poem-by-poem basis. But Antin’s procedures concede less to chance and engage more actively with pop-cultural materials than do Mac Low’s or Cage’s. Hélène Aji points out that Antin’s “collage material is almost never of canonical literary origin, but rather comes from the pieces of writing that inhabit our daily lives” (“1960s” 91), and in this sense a work like “November Exercises,” which “is built out of phrases from a book called *Essential Idioms of English*” (Antin and Bernstein 35), has more in common with Warhol’s soup cans than with Cage’s writings-through of canonical authors like James Joyce or Henry David Thoreau. (Antin has explained that his affinity for mass culture—“alien elements” in his writing—did not go unnoticed by those friends who “were hostile to pop and minimal art” [35].) Among poets of the ’60s, Antin’s work probably has most in common with the language experiments of Vito Acconci, another poet closely identified with the world of performance art. Like Acconci, Antin may be read as a poet unusually situated between the worlds of procedural poetry and conceptual art, though it is the former context with which this study is
primarily concerned. As a procedural poet, Antin further expands the possibilities of proceduralism itself.\textsuperscript{11}

**“Novel Poem” and the Tactics of the Text**

Different procedures highlight different aspects of poetic production, and Antin’s collage work tends to foreground the search for source material. Openly reworking text from a grammar book or a work of language philosophy generates writing that is thoroughly reflexive.\textsuperscript{12} The procedure produces language by using language that is about language. Moreover, Antin’s procedural writings reveal a kind of postmodern foraging for text closely related to the “tactics of consumption” described in Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Certeau xvii). In the following pages, I will read Antin’s “Novel Poem”—perhaps the most intriguing and challenging of his early procedural works—as an enactment of Certeau’s concept of “reading as poaching.” In addition to challenging conventional limits upon genre and source material, “Novel Poem” illustrates the process of tactical reading that Certeau finds fundamental to life in a consumer society. Furthermore, Antin’s own descriptions of his writing procedure clearly dovetail with Certeau’s notion of tactics as dislocated and time-sensitive.

Antin describes “Novel Poem” as a work “derived line by line from a novel—often a trashy novel” (Antin and Bernstein 35). Written in 1967 and published the following year in *code of flag behavior*, the poem is in part the product of an unsatisfactory work environment.\textsuperscript{13} In this sense, Antin’s procedural form is unique within the present study. While Antin’s work may be read through a Jamesonian transcoding operation as a commentary upon postindustrial production and consumption, it is also quite literally the product of the poet’s day job. While writing “Novel Poem,” Antin was the educational curator for an American painting exhibition at Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art. The exhibit, which was on loan from Montreal, was poorly attended. “Nobody came,” Antin explains. “Or nearly nobody. Because they had almost all seen it in Montreal, except occasional classes from Harvard or Mass Art or U. Mass or Boston College or Emerson or any one of the hundred or so liberal arts schools scattered around the Boston-Cambridge area” (SP 16). He occasionally delivered “explanatory lectures to the largely incomprehending students and their teachers”; between these lectures, he observed that one of his coworkers, a public-relations professional, “sailed in with three brand new and completely different novels under her arm every
day” (16). Such apparently voracious reading “amazed” Antin, and he “resolved to try to figure out what she liked about all these books, but mainly how she read them” (16). He explains,

while she was on the phone I took one of the books—I think it was called *The Andromeda Strain*—propped it up near my typewriter and proceeded to flip the pages, reading a line here and a line there, and then I got tired of it and started flipping through another book, by Gore Vidal I think, and I realized I was enjoying it because I was reading these books that I could never stand to read before, or all that I cared about or found interesting in these books. Then I put some paper in the typewriter and I began typing what I was reading, and it became a little game—no more than one line from a page. Sometimes only a phrase. Sometimes nothing. And I never went back. I read and typed relentlessly forward, quickly making up these little songs, till I was through. (*SP* 16–17)

After the exhibition was over, having worked through several books using this procedure, Antin discovered that he “liked reading novels this way and writing them” (17). Thus, he continued to create collage work from texts by Iris Murdoch, Han Su Yin, Alberto Moravia, Doris Lessing, and Ayn Rand (17). Writing through various “popular,” “serious,” and “trashy” texts allowed him to find “the first derivative of novels, to determine the nature of their curvature, their turning points, to distill a characteristic if sometimes undiscovered tone” (17). Moreover, by using the workplace as the site of poetic production, Antin—at least symbolically—subverts the distinction between vocation and avocation, between labor’s daily grind and the freedom of unstructured time.

As Antin himself suggests, the procedure was also a way of reading—a way of getting through novels that he “could never stand to read before.” More than a mere assessment of aesthetic merit, this reading practice may be transcoded as a commentary on the consumption of texts within postindustrial culture. Facing a seemingly limitless store of fiction—whether prize-winning works of literature or airport novels—the postmodern reader must daily confront the overproduction of texts. In fact, this phenomenon is not limited to fiction. One can scarcely avail oneself of public transportation in any major city without confronting a constant barrage of legible material, from billboards to signage to graffiti. The situation lends great importance to the process of selective reading. It
leads the citizen of the postmodern city to place (often unconscious) self-imposed limitations on his or her own consumption of text. Certeau shows an acute awareness of the contested status of the act of reading, which he calls “only one aspect of consumption, but a fundamental one” (167). For Certeau, the difference between a reader and a writer is analogous to the difference between a consumer and a producer: “In a society that is increasingly written, organized by the power of modifying things and of reforming structures on the basis of scriptural models…the binominal set production-consumption can often be replaced by its general equivalent and indicator, the binominal set writing-reading” (167–168). Yet as it exists within everyday life, the practice of reading also complicates and subverts the clear distinction between producer and consumer:

The reader takes neither the position of the author nor an author’s position. He invents in texts something different from what they “intended.” He detaches them from their (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity of allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings. (169)

This inventive reading practice—a practice that “detaches” textual “fragments” from their original context and opens up new possibilities for the construction of meaning—neatly characterizes the procedure Antin used to produce “Novel Poem.” What’s more, Certeau’s basic notion of consumer “tactics” is reflected in Antin’s use of the workplace as a site of writing: “I call a ‘tactic,’” Certeau explains, “a calculus which cannot count on a ‘proper’ (a spatial or institutional localization)…. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing’” (xix). The writing of a poem in the workplace, using borrowed novels, points to just such an opportunity. The procedure itself began as a response to a temporal predicament (boredom at work) and a dislocation—or rather, a relocation of artistic production within an “institutional localization”—a museum. And this is perhaps one of the great ironies of Antin’s “Novel Poem”: No one expects art or art-literature to be produced in a museum. Rather, it is a place of consumption. Yet Antin turns consumption itself into an act of artistic production. In Certeau’s words, “The reader produces gardens that miniaturize and collate a world, like a Robinson Crusoe discovering an island…. He is thus a novelist” (173). Or again in
The Tactics of the Text

Antin’s words: “When the show was over I realized I liked reading novels this way and writing them” (SP 17).

This seeming fluidity between the positions of reader and writer also calls into question the idea of genre itself. In what sense does making poetry out of a novel make one a novelist? Antin calls genre “a theatre of expectations” and “a site of possible operations within which those expectations can be satisfied, deferred, deflected, frustrated or transformed” (“Novels” 210). Sherman Paul seems to refer to such generic expectations and satisfaction when he argues that “Novel Poem” “gives us the gist of novels and lets us have the novelistic pleasure of imaginatively filling them out” (37). Certainly, Antin’s attention to the “turning points” and “characteristic if sometimes undiscovered tone” of the source material indicates an interrogation of novelistic expectations. In reading “Novel Poem,” one does not need any specific knowledge of the particular seed texts to feel the novelistic conventions behind the language. Lines such as “this is the President speaking / why did you not launch an offensive / go to condition green” (SP 133) are evidently derived from a political thriller of some sort, probably one set during the cold war. Although it is theoretically possible to track down the source for such lines, Antin’s project is quite far removed from a Poundian system of fragments as directives for further reading. After all, Antin characterizes the novels with which he initiates his procedure as books that he “could never stand to read before.” The use of lines from these novels is not a recommendation. Rather, it is a subversion of genre, a baring of novelistic (and poetic) device. Thus, “taking the first derivative of novels, to determine the nature of their curvature” (17) is a way of finding the coded generic conventions of a work. The clipped, authoritative language of “this is the President speaking / why did you not launch an offensive / go to condition green” would suggest the (campy?) seriousness of a postwar thriller even without telling one-word lines like “megatons” and “pre-emptive” (133). As Paul rightly notes, one has little trouble imagining the larger plots of the novels from which such lines are derived. Of course, one’s imaginings may not coincide with the novel itself, but fidelity to source material is irrelevant when it comes to the tactics of consumption.

That Antin intends to question generic conventions is evident from the opening of the poem, the first two sections of which are subtitled “10 songs” and “7 songs” respectively. Such subtitles suggest a lyricism that one would not normally expect in fiction, yet the poem itself is, if not lyrical, certainly musical, particularly in its rhythmic repetitions. Discussing Antin’s early performance poem “Talking at Pomona,” Marjorie Perloff
compares “a highly structured set of permutations on a few terms” to the method of a Gertrude Stein composition (Introduction vii). The same might be said of the first section of “10 songs”:

why not the one on the shelf as easily as the one in the lab
but why not the one in the lab as easily as the one on the shelf

(SP 121)

The two questions have identical grammatical structures and feature nearly the same word order, save for the chiasmic inversion of “shelf” and “lab” in the second line. In the context of the poem, these words function as synecdoches for some absent world of scientific experimentation, and they seem to designate the location of a pair of unidentified objects under discussion within this scientific milieu. Compare this permutation on two terms to Stein’s use of the word “dirty” in the following meditation on chicken from Tender Buttons (1914): “Alas a dirty word, alas a dirty third alas a dirty third, alas a dirty bird” (1903–1932 341). A similarly insistent repetition engenders a shift in connotation as the adjective moves from one deployment to the next. The word “dirty” takes on notably different senses as it traverses the textual space between “word” and “bird,” and these shifts in meaning are amplified if one chooses to hear the echo of “a lass” in “alas.” More might be said about this example of Steinian indeterminacy, but the point I would like to make here is that Antin’s procedure has effectively transformed novelistic material into a postmodern poetic permutation of the modernist avant-garde.

Steinian echoes are also audible in the second section of “10 songs,” but here the play of sound becomes a play of sight as well:

he’d say that the good time always gives way to the hard
and that the hard time always softens again to the good
and that was something you could see anywhere
but you saw it better if you lived by the sea (SP 121)

The indirect speech contained in this stanza has an aphoristic quality and is perhaps even downright trite, and the anaphora of the middle lines emphasizes this quality. The two lines beginning “and that” both sound and look like a kind of repetitive rambling, thanks to the parallelism of their placement on the page. The chiasmic placement of the adjectives “good” and “hard” in the first two lines is reenacted in miniature by the placement of the words “was” and “saw” in the last two lines. Placed one
over the other, these two words appear as a sort of chiasmic visual rhyme, and this jumbling of letters is complemented by the homophonic confusion of “see” and “sea,” which also form a sort of visual near rhyme. All of this permutational play accompanies a phallic double entendre present in the phrase “the hard time always softens again to the good.” In the last two lines, the truistic quality of the indirect speech shows itself for what it actually is—a deeply bourgeois faith in the ability of property to compensate for existential angst. More directly put, it is easier to see “the good” from a view lot.

The compressed rhetoric of the earlier stanza bears a notable similarity to Lyn Hejinian’s compressed mode three decades later in “The Composition of the Cell,” a procedural poem collected in The Cold of Poetry (1994). While there is no reason to think that Hejinian had Antin’s “Novel Poem” in mind, her condensation of preexisting text (her own, in this case) resembles Antin’s work at the formal level. In Wittgenstein’s Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary (1996), Perloff provides a helpful close reading of the opening of “The Composition of the Cell,” along with an analysis of Hejinian’s formal procedure. Perloff points out that “the sentences in ‘The Composition of the Cell’ are culled from the much longer poetic sequence The Cell, published in book form two years earlier” (WL 211). As Perloff explains, “The Composition of the Cell” “begins with two rhyming couplets” that evince “a nursery-rhyme element” and a “jingly” quality (214):

1.1 It is the writer’s object to supply.
1.6 Rocks are emitted by sentences to the eye.
2.13 Circumstances rest between rocks.
2.14 The person of which I speak is between clocks. (Hejinian, Cold 111)

Hejinian’s composition process involves “writing through her own earlier poem and rearranging or recontextualizing its statements” (Perloff, WL 212). Individual lines (or “commonplaces”) “take the form of pseudo-definitions, nonanswers to hypothetical questions, and riddles that can’t be solved” (214). It then becomes the reader’s job “to construct a context that might make sense of these riddling references” (215). Antin’s chiasmic word placement and homophony present a similar challenge to the reader. Lacking the language in its original context, the reader of “Novel Poem” must infer an absent, overarching context for the rhetoric. After all, some character or narrator is presumably speaking the lines about
good times and hard times, though one does not finally know to what extent the lines have been cut up and reconstructed by Antin. The poet’s constructive consumption of text thus calls for another act of constructive consumption on the part of the reader.

In section “v,” titled “ann and jim,” the repetition of individual words takes on an incantatory quality as the name of the opaque character “ann” recurs in a variety of grammatical structures. The repetition is accentuated by the line breaks, which turn the woman’s name into a kind of meandering punctuation mark on the page:

in any case
there was still
ann
pity for the unloved
ann
the futility of life
with ann
the period of meditation in his room
the abstention
from ann
how unfair he had been
to ann
how cunningly he had awaited a pretext
how carefully and deliberately he had hidden his anger
from ann
how monstrously unfair he had been
to ann
he could never have treated her rationally
ann
could never have explained what his grievances were
to ann
yet he pitied her
he was bound to the place
still
by ann. (SP 129–130)

The conventional narration tells us something about “jim” and his apparent emotional instability, but it provides almost no insight into the character of “ann,” who appears primarily as the object of obsession and manipulation. The line breaks foreground her absence by calling
attention to a homophonous echo contained in her name: “ann” suggests the indefinite article “an.” The absence of a noun following this article accentuates the absence of “ann” herself. Thus, the lines “he was bound to the place / still / by ann” gesture toward another, unwritten line: “he was bound to the place / still / by an accident,” for example, or any other permutation on the line that ends with a noun, adjective, or adverb beginning with a vowel (“an instinct,” “an unconscionable act,” “an implicitly understood agreement,” etc.). The homophonous resonance of “ann” as it is repeated down the page thus functions as an indicator of absence itself. This secondary reading of the formerly novelistic text is (according to my own act of tactical reading) encoded in the line breaks themselves. The consumption of a novel has become a simultaneous critique of the vacuity of its characters, or at least of the conventionality of the relationship between the two.

A more pointed critique of generic constraints begins part way through section “iii,” where the use of the indefinite article highlights the interchangeability of novelistic characters: “a man about fifty / a bachelor / or perhaps a married man” (126). Here the identity of the man in question is not yet fixed. In the next stanza, a woman appears, and the two characters are identified by nationality, though their exact relationship remains uncertain: “a man and a woman married / or perhaps a long relationship / an American man and an English woman / man and a woman / both sexually proud” (126). With no knowledge of these two beyond their nationality and their sexual confidence, one is tempted to read them as personifications—as some form of national allegory. However, the broad contours of these characters seem to take more specific shape in the lines that follow: “two rakes / male and female together / this time the woman / a wandering man / a woman artist / a man and a woman in a love affair / a woman who has fallen in love against her will / a healthy woman in love with a man / a man using grown-up language / to gain a woman” (126–127). Following the description of this man and woman as “sexually proud,” the line “two rakes” connotes libertinism. Yet it is quite possible that these “rakes” referred to the eponymous tools in their original context; Antin’s procedure allows him to redeploy words in ways that contradict their original meanings. For the reader of the poem, the issue remains undecidable—a fact that emphasizes the creativity required by the act of reading itself, which is always both an act of consumption and production of meaning. The series of substantive phrases following the line “two rakes” seems to qualify the ambiguous phrase, yet one is also free to read
the series as a group of wholly independent characterizations. “male and female / together” may refer to the “rakes,” or it may refer to another couple entirely. The same is true of the “wandering man,” the “woman artist,” the “woman who has fallen in love against her will,” and so on. These descriptions both modify the “two rakes” and point to some other absent novelistic context, depending upon one’s reading.

The centrality of absence in Antin’s text (or, to be more specific, the absence of an original narrative context) recalls Bob Perelman’s poem “China” and Fredric Jameson’s notorious discussion of it in Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991). Jameson uses Perelman’s poem as an example of the “schizophrenic disjunction” of postmodern writing, and of Language poetry in particular (29). Not surprisingly, critics sympathetic to the political and aesthetic aims of the Language poets have criticized Jameson’s alignment of the movement with the notion of schizophrenia. But for the purposes of the present discussion, Jameson’s larger argument about postmodern disjunction is less relevant than his discussion of referential absence in the poem “China,” which includes lines such as the following: “The landscape is motorized. / The train takes you where it goes. / Bridges among water. / Folks straggling along vast stretches of concrete, heading into the plane” (qtd. in Jameson 28). These lines, as Jameson points out, are essentially captions written for a photography album that is not available to the reader: “The sentences of the poem in question are then Perelman’s own captions to those pictures, their referents another image, another absent text; and the unity of the poem is no longer to be found within its language but outside itself, in the bound unity of another, absent book” (30). The same might be said of Antin’s “Novel Poem”: its “unity” exists in a series of absent texts. Yet as Perelman himself points out, narrative is as much constructed by the reader as it is inherent in a text: “De-narrativization is a necessary part of construction…. But this process needs to be seen for the combined reading and writing practice that it is: re-narrativization is also necessary” (78). In other words, in the case of both “China” and “Novel Poem,” there is an absent source text, but the “unity of the poem” that Jameson speaks of is not to be found in source material. Rather, whatever unity is possible will emerge from the “re-narrativization” practiced by readers.

After the lines “a man using grown-up language / to gain a woman,” the narrative of “Novel Poem” seems to dissolve in a Steinian moment of “Beginning again and again” (Stein, 1903–1932 522): “a woman meets a man” (SP 127). Having already established the presence of “a love affair” and “a healthy woman in love with a man,” the poem presents a new
first encounter that must be read as either nonsequential or simply unrelated to the preceding lines. In any event, the tension between narrative construction and dissolution continues for the rest of section “iii” with lines like “she is in love,” “she is dismayed,” “he says his penis is limp,” “she says she understands the nature of his illness,” “a man or a woman,” “a husband unfaithful to his wife,” and “two people of any kind” (127–128). The section ends with the lines “a mother / a son / a father / two daughters / lovers / pity a nice woman” (128), and with this final series it becomes apparent that the characters of this novel-in-miniature are totally conventional and interchangeable. One can write a novel about “two people of any kind,” provided that a certain amount of plot development takes place. I would not want to argue that the characters in, for instance, William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930) are indistinguishable from those of James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), but Antin is not working with Joyce or Faulkner texts in this particular procedure. Rather, his use of textual material mounts an implicit critique of “trashy” novels very much in keeping with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s broad critique of the culture industry:

Every film is a preview of the next, which promises yet again to unite the same heroic couple under the same exotic sun: anyone arriving late cannot tell whether he is watching the trailer or the real thing. The montage character of the culture industry, the synthetic, controlled manner in which its products are assembled—factory-like not only in the film studio but also, virtually, in the compilation of the cheap biographies, journalistic novels, and hit songs—pre-disposes it to advertising: the individual moment, in being detachable, replaceable, estranged even technically from any coherence of meaning, lends itself to purposes outside the work. (Adorno and Horkheimer 132)

There is an important distinction to be made, however. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the “factory-like” aspect of cultural production is irremediably negative. For Antin, the “factory-like” reassembly of fragments of the culture industry functions as a tactical response to the culture industry itself. Consumption becomes production; reading becomes writing. The very detachability and interchangeability of novelistic characters—and the syntactical units used to describe them—allows for the construction of an active, open-ended reading experience in “Novel Poem.”
The interchangeability of characters is part of Antin’s larger interrogation of identity itself. In “Novel Poem,” perspective and narrative identity are always fluid and always in question. In part five of section “i,” for example, a second-person narrative shifts mid-stanza into the third-person, with the result that the characters being narrated seem to lose their status as discrete subjects:

you are talking to someone
and you look up
and it is not that person
or everybody begins saying it is time
you are filled with anxiety and go about asking what is
going to happen
and they look at you
and dont answer
climbing the steps he had bridled with fear
and entering he had found himself in a narrow smelly corridor
he was traveling on an unreal train
but it was not he
it was a boy named Michael Rose (SP 122)

The shift from second- to third-person narrative takes place between the lines “and they look at you / and dont answer” and “climbing the steps he had bridled with fear,” but in fact the entire stanza highlights the fluidity of narrative identity. In the lines “you are talking to someone / and you look up / and it is not that person,” this fluidity is phenomenological rather than ontological. That is, the confusion of identity occurs as an incident of misrecognition within the perception of the second-person subject. Because the following line begins with the conjunction “or,” the anxiety present in this next narrative unit is cast backward on the original confusion between the “someone” and “that person”: “or everybody begins saying it is time / you are filled with anxiety and go about asking what is going to happen.” Either misrecognition or the punctuality of some unknown event—but in either case anxiety pervades the uncertain situation, and this anxiety also inflects the gaze of the unspecified others: “and they look at you / and dont answer.” The identity of the narrative subject has been isolated; the original misrecognition of “someone” who is not “that person” transforms itself into the misrecognition of the second-person subject. When “they look at you / and dont answer,” they call into question your identity: “you” has become a “someone” to whom
“they” do not respond. Anxiety continues to haunt the second half of the narrative, as a fearful “he” moves from “a narrow smelly corridor” to “an unreal train.” Somewhere in the process of this narrative movement, it becomes apparent that “it was not he / it was a boy named Michael Rose.” The idiomatic syntax of these two sentences beginning with an impersonal “it” serves to foreground the impersonality of the subject position itself. With the rearrangement of a single sentence, with the retyping of this sentence in a new context, “he” becomes “not he.” Two strands of narrative that, in another context, would be entirely conventional, function—thanks to their juxtaposition—as an inquiry into the nature of identity itself.

This exploration of identity continues in the poem’s fourth section, “an impersonal poison.” The subtitle draws attention to subjectivity (or rather its other, impersonality), in that it is tautological: What other sort of poison is there? The first six lines of this section recall Arthur Rimbaud’s 1871 assertion that “Je est un autre” (237); it is impossible to know whether the various first-person statements come from the same character in the absent novelistic text: “i say i am conscious / i am discreet / i like the feel of his breast hair / i like the smells of sex of sweat of skin / i write the word ‘blood’ / i imagine a meal” (SP 128). The first assertion is essentially a restatement of the Cartesian claim to existence, but whatever stable identity “i” confers upon “i” quickly disappears in the following lines, in which the discontinuity of the various statements suggests that this “i” may not have a locus in the same speaker. On the other hand, it may. Assuming that Antin’s process has allowed him to radically compress the narrative of an entire novel, one can imagine a character who, at various points in a work of fiction, would make all of the above assertions. This undecidability again allows for an act of productive reading. In the context of the poem, the novelistic narrative is open to readerly construction and reconstruction. Antin’s process of reading against and through the novel initiates another act of constructive reading by the readers of the poem. In short, the mental labor required for the production of meaning is transferred from novelist to reader through the mediation of Antin’s poetic procedure.

“Novel Poem” will not allow for narrative stability within its own text. Part way through “an impersonal poison,” the text abruptly shifts from first- to third-person narration: “i get off the bus / prosperous comfortable London / taking by hazard is part of the pleasure / an unfairness of secretaries nurses / an impersonal poison / it was part of his intention to rob words of their power / to grow big” (128). The “i” of the London
tourist gives way to a metatextual moment of commentary on language itself. Perhaps “to rob words of their power / to grow big” is to prevent them from disappearing into narrative and losing their line-by-line, material presence. For the words in “Novel Poem” precisely do not “grow big”—that is, they do not cede their linear, serial quality to the larger ends of plot. In reading the poem, one is constantly aware of reading against it, of rewriting it as one reads. “i” may say that “i am conscious” or that “i am discreet,” but the act of saying itself is under examination in Antin’s process, not just what is said. The affectless, impersonal “i” of Antin’s text—an “i” that is re-identified with each new utterance—contrasts markedly with the stability of speech in most popular fiction. Moreover, Antin’s “i” is far removed from the earlier postmodern lyrical subject of the New York School poets. In Frank O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings” (1956), for example, the lyrical “I” presses the boundaries of identity, but this pressing feels spontaneous. The artificial identifications O’Hara makes in the middle of section “4” of the poem remain centered in the performative genius of the poet:

I am a Hittite in love with a horse. I don’t know what blood’s in me I feel like an African prince I am a girl walking downstairs in a red pleated dress with heels I am a champion taking a fall I am a jockey with a sprained ass-hole I am the light mist in which a face appears and it is another face of blonde I am a baboon eating a banana I am a dictator looking at his wife I am a doctor eating a child and the child’s mother smiling I am a Chinaman climbing a mountain I am a child smelling his father’s underwear I am an Indian sleeping on a scalp (O’Hara 256)

These identifications cross racial, sexual, and temporal boundaries (and even a species boundary: “I am a baboon eating a banana”), but they never manage to call into question the identity of O’Hara the poet, who is clearly at the center of this virtuosic and imaginative display. The transition from “I am a Chinaman climbing a mountain” to “I am a child smelling his father’s underwear” is abrupt, but this rhythmic exchange of identities is all united under the person of the poet, who accounts for his shifting subjectivity with the statement, “I don’t know what blood’s / in me.” In fact, the anaphoric series of “I am” statements is interrupted early on by an “I feel like” (“I feel like an African prince”), an interruption
that suggests that this hybrid identity is, after all, a trope for the feelings of the poet, as the title of the poem indicates. Antin’s “i” provides no such possibility of reduction, because it is never really Antin’s “i”—never more than a provisional, textually constructed identity manipulated by the poet. One never wonders if Antin really did “get off the bus” in “prosperous comfortable London.” To assume so is to misunderstand his process of textual assemblage.

Calling the identity of the speaker into question leads to an exploration of speech itself, which is to say rhetoric. Antin’s investigation of rhetoric in “Novel Poem” is very much of a piece with his interest in Wittgensteinian language games. For Antin, poetry and language games are, if not synonymous, closely related; an understanding of poetry as language game allows for a broader definition of poetry in general. “Taking a hint from Wittgenstein,” Antin explains,

we should really ask whether or not there is only one language game that is poetry, or whether poetry, which is an ancient supergenre, may not consist of an indefinitely large family of language games that, like human families, can always admit new members by intermarriage and adoption and admit a language game that overlaps the language game of information transmission. (“Wittgenstein” 161)

If information transmission is a language game, then rhetoric comprises both the playing of this game and the study of its rules and variations. Within “Novel Poem,” the juxtaposition of different registers of language heightens the visibility of rhetoric. It points to various tactical approaches to the playing of the game. For instance, in section six of part “ii. 7 songs,” the four-line stanza is divisible into two pairings of formal and informal speech: “i’ll make tea / i shall prepare some tea / i dont want to be involved / im not giving any evidence” (SP 125). In terms of information transmission, each of the first two lines accomplishes the same end; each alerts some unknown interlocutor that tea is on the way. But the variation in linguistic register carries with it an excess level of meaning. Because “shall” is an uncommon verb form in American English, the second line suggests a non-American speaker. Moreover, to “prepare” tea, rather than to “make” it, conveys a sense of ritual more characteristic of British habits than American. In addition to transmitting the information that tea is on the way, this second line hints that it is an English person who will be bringing it. I say “hints,” however,
because the meaning derived from the rhetoric of the second line is ultimately dependent upon readerly inference. As for the second pairing, both lines indicate that a speaker is averse to becoming entangled in a conflict, but the first (“i dont want to be involved”) expresses a desire, while the second (“im not giving any evidence”) represents a refusal. In juxtaposing these rhetorical variations, Antin again practices a kind of linguistic minimalism; the reader must reconstruct a meaningful context from only a few clues. The two statements may or may not refer to the same situation. The implicit urgency of the second statement may or may not be a response to some absent plot twist (e.g., the speaker says no, but the interlocutor becomes insistent). Ultimately, the absent plot is irrelevant, because these lines prompt a new language game wherein a reader will make his or her own narrative connections based on the text of the poem. Thus, Antin’s procedural language game leads to another game—a sort of guessing game—in which the reader recontextualizes a series of decontextualized narrative fragments. There will be as many valid recontextualizations as there are readers.

By calling Antin’s presentation of divergent rhetoric “minimalist,” I mean to point toward the fact that the discontinuous juxtaposition of individual language units—much like the serial presentation of individual objects in the minimalist sculpture of the 1960s—overtly requires an act of interpretive reception. This act of interpretation is complicated by the fact that the reader does not approach the assembled language fragments of “Novel Poem” strictly as a poem. The least familiarity with the conventions of fiction will cause the reader to hear echoes of novelistic rhetoric within the poem itself. That is, one’s reading of the poetry will be conditioned by a second set of generic expectations. Barrett Watten, who notes a similar generic hybridity in the work of the Language poets, finds that “in certain writers,” one encounters “a borrowing of alternative total forms with values entirely different from those of the totalizing present, to be used in the construction of the work. Narrative or expository tags from other genres shift the present from the totality being asserted to a synthetic and more possible whole” (Syntax 145). In “Novel Poem,” the use of external narrative tags is apparent. Watten’s emphasis on form as temporal (a “totalizing present”) also bears upon Antin’s procedure in that, unlike most visual art, a poem unfolds sequentially. It necessarily contains a temporal element. In “Novel Poem,” the sequential dimension of poetic collage causes interesting moments of rhetorical indeterminacy. In the second stanza of section “iii,” the lines “to a woman / to women / to the enemy” (SP 125) effect a misogynistic development based on their
progression from individual to gender group to abstract category. Were the order of these lines reversed, they would instead denote a sort of deductive misogyny—a movement from abstract category to gender to individual. In the third stanza of section “iii,” the sequence of individual statements works subtly to call their truth value into question: “i suppose we could say that they name us / we feel safe with them / we are on some kind of frontier” (SP 125). Here the second and third statements may be read as independently meaningful, or as clauses subordinate to the verb “suppose.” This uncertainty lends a certain irony to the line “we feel safe with them”: how safe does one actually feel if one only supposes the safety? If the sequence of the stanza were reversed, the uncertainty would be removed from the first two statements (though the line “we are on some kind of frontier” would still strike this reader as ironic, given its tone of space-race optimism). Within the broader artistic context of assemblage form, Antin’s exploration of the rhetorical effect of sequence is especially significant, since such explorations are not equally possible in painting or sculpture. While the arrangement of elements in a Rauschenberg combine is critical to its effect, this effect unfolds spatially rather than temporally. The sequential dimension of assemblage is first and foremost a textual phenomenon, and Antin’s investigation of it makes good use of the collage potential inherent in writing.

Jameson’s argument that all literary writing “can be said to reckon the whole value of its own creation itself into the process” is especially true of “Novel Poem.” The selection of collage material at times functions as a commentary on literary collage itself. In section “ix,” the assembled lines begin by alluding to a relationship that is at once mysterious, sexual, and vaguely dangerous:

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every now and then
mysterious bumps made him jump
he would stand transfixed in a doorway
see a scene of disorder
she told him in a confidential manner
‘now its my turn to hide’
that had been on a Thursday
he crushed the bottle under his heel
he took out his pocket knife and loosened the earth
he rose and brushed the knee of his trousers
she took away the tray
she placed the bowl on the bed
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she kept coming back to his sex
a doubtful whiteness (SP 137)

The compression of narrative in these lines once again reflects Antin’s desire “to distill a characteristic if sometimes undiscovered tone” from the seed material (SP 17). Though most details of this relationship remain indeterminate, the allusions to a game of hide-and-seek and to a potential (phallic) threat (“he took out his pocket knife”) lend a sense of risk and perhaps even a suppressed violence to the sexual encounter(s) depicted in these lines. As for form, the novelistic material takes on a paratactic arrangement on the page, with the three lines beginning “he” juxtaposed with three lines beginning with “she.” Thus, the shift in narrative focus is indicated visually in the context of the poem. The sexual encounter is followed by five lines of discourse that may or may not lead directly to the end of the liaison: “‘after you finish school’ / ‘you will take your law degree’ / ‘we will give it to you’ / ‘but I should like to go to Germany’ / ‘you must go to England and France’” (137). In the narration following these lines, the woman of the earlier lines has disappeared and the man becomes somber and perhaps even nostalgic: “he knelt down under the tree / he slept for some time / he remembered the blue glass / he stepped out of a doorway / bareheaded / he performed these actions / with a sense of austerity” (137). The verb “performed” is telling in that it gestures both to the conventionality of the man’s duties and, in the context of the poem, to the conventionality of the novelistic narrative itself. The narrative is part of a cultural performance that is, if not predictable, at least expected. The extent to which this novelistic performance is governed by generic expectations is demonstrated by the paucity of details necessary to construct an entire plot. If the thirty-two lines of section “ix” encapsulate a book-length work of fiction, this fact is an implicit commentary on the economy of Antin’s process but also on the bloated superfluity of the popular novel. (A similar commentary is encoded in Antin’s 1967 prose work “Autobiography,” which takes up only twenty-three pages of the Selected Poems.) The metatextual resonance of the “actions” to be “performed” gives way to an evident commentary on collage form itself in the final six lines of section “ix”: “all the same / there must be sense / in this madness / only / he was not in a position / to discover it” (137). The character’s lost “sense” of order within the chaotic events of a novel allegorizes the reader’s experience of Antin’s procedure. The lines allude to a cohesive, closed narrative, but the reader is not in a position to discover
it. If what Jameson calls “the unity of the poem” is available anywhere, it must be in the act of interpretation, because the fragments of Antin’s assemblage will not provide this unity.\(^\text{16}\)

Antin’s collage procedure—like any experimental form—carries within it the possibility of failure, which is to say the possibility that a work should fail to achieve some desired effect. What the desired effect may be, and whether or not it has been achieved, are issues that are constantly under negotiation each time a new reader approaches a text. Clearly, I find Antin’s “Novel Poem” to be aesthetically interesting and culturally relevant—a success, in other words. But the possibility for failure is ever present. In the final, five-line section of the poem, a moment of slapstick comedy simultaneously gestures toward the larger issues of risk and failure in the avant-garde:

“we’ll take a chance” said the man
“we’ll take a chance” said Andrei
“as long as one can walk” said Andrei
“one walks” said the man
then the man fell (SP 139)

The comedic timing of the passage recalls dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot (1954). What’s more, the exchange dramatizes the potential distance between intention and action that shadows any serious effort, whether of avant-garde construction or existential purposiveness. At the risk of employing overly heroic rhetoric, I would like to suggest that, for Antin, the potential for failure—for falling—lends importance and immediacy to experiments with artistic form and procedure. In his talk poem “tuning,” Antin describes literary relevance in terms of urgency and necessity:

...so that for me
literature defined as literature has no urgency it has no need of address there are too many things no there are not too many things there are only a few things you may want to talk about but there are too many ways you could talk about them and no urgency in which way you choose to talk about them there are too many ways to proceed too many possibilities for making well crafted objects none of which seem particularly necessary (tuning 106–107)
Using the improvisatory form of the talk poem is one way to add urgency to the literary work and to limit the numerous conventional “ways to proceed.” Using the culture industry against itself—as Antin does in “Novel Poem”—is another. The tactical reading procedure that Antin uses to create his novel assemblage (novel in both senses of the word) also derives its urgency from the specific political and economic conditions faced by the postmodern poet. The ever-increasing commodification of mainstream literature, as well as the overproduction of disposable fiction, are indicators of the totalizing trajectory of the culture industry, of its tendency to become “the irrefutable prophet of the existing order” (Adorno and Horkheimer 118). Yet, as Certeau reminds us, the strategic machinations of postindustrial capital also provide impetus for new and creative practices (artistic or otherwise):

The ruling order serves as a support for innumerable productive activities, while at the same time blinding its proprietors to this creativity (like those “bosses” who simply can’t see what is being created within their own enterprises). Carried to its limit, this order would be the equivalent of the rules of meter and rhyme for poets of earlier times: a body of constraints stimulating new discoveries, a set of rules with which improvisation plays. (xxii)

Antin’s experimentation with formal procedure is a creative manipulation of the “ruling order” itself, in the form of its cultural productions. And the originary constraints, or “rules,” of his procedure derive from the “ruling order” itself, as represented by institutional place and by generic conventions. At the symbolic level, the very existence of “Novel Poem” represents a subversion of the constraints of labor, for it was written within the workplace. The poem functions as an improvisation upon novelistic content within an institutional framework. Ultimately, avant-garde practice is also a practice of everyday life, which “invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others” (Certeau xii).

The issue of intellectual property—of copyright—is an explicit concern of Antin, who imagines the avant-garde as “a / community of artists who don’t recognize copyrights and / patents or shouldn’t except under unusual circumstances” (avant-garde 47). Collage procedure as Antin practices it in “Novel Poem” functions as a form of artistic appropriation—a form of poaching. In his unapologetic poaching upon the property of the culture industry, Antin is subversive in a way...
reminiscent of the Language writers, though he has distanced himself from the Marxian affiliations of this later avant-garde. His use of procedural form in “Novel Poem”—as in poems like “The Black Plague,” “The Separation Meditations,” and “The November Exercises”—mounts a critique of postindustrial literary production in the same vein as the Language writing of a committed Marxist like Silliman. Thus, I will give my final word on Antin to one of the politically radical theorists of Language poetry, Bruce Andrews, whose description of reading as writing could be a manifesto for Antin’s procedure:

Define comprehension as something other than consumption. (Other then.) So it’s politicizing: a radical reading embodied in writing. A writing that is itself a “wild reading” solicits wild reading. The reading is a response, is a dialogue with the paradigms of sense—with rhetoric (which is a misreading in the writing itself): “We’ve been misread!” The job is to go beyond these norms & limits, to read them backward, to offer up a different refraction of the circumstances. Let’s let the status quo read itself being quarantined, scolded, frag’d, & interrupted. (54–55)
CHAPTER 4

“A new content”: Procedural Form and Concrete Reality in Ron Silliman’s *Tjanting*

From Ted Berrigan’s New York School aesthetic to David Antin’s subversive reading tactics, we now move to Ron Silliman’s thoroughly Marxian critique of postindustrial American society. Within the present study, Silliman’s book-length prose poem *Tjanting* (The Figures, 1981) represents the most ideologically radical use of procedural form; indeed, few well-known postmodern poets have been as committed to a Marxist political program as was Silliman in the late 1970s and 1980s. Not surprisingly, then, labor is a central concern in his work, and within *Tjanting* it manifests itself both in self-reflexive comments on the writing process and at the level of form, where the poem’s meticulous, labor-intensive procedure is always legible. To a greater degree than both Berrigan and Antin, Silliman includes social critique at the level of subject matter. *Tjanting* depicts the economic disparity, postindustrial urban decline, and oppressive violence of the postindustrial United States. In this chapter, I attempt to (1) situate *Tjanting*’s form within my larger examination of the relationship between postmodern proceduralism and postindustrial labor; (2) explore the new, postnarrative realism produced by the poem; (3) examine the poem’s allusive references to Silliman’s modernist precursors; (4) demonstrate that the poem’s self-reflexive commentary on the writing process functions as a persistent reminder that labor is the precondition of textual consumption; and (5) discuss the poem’s critique of two spectacular symptoms of
postindustrial society: advertising and violence. Ultimately, I would like to suggest that, at the level of subject matter, *Tjanting* vividly depicts the socioeconomic turmoil of urban life in postindustrial America and that, at the level of form, it encodes (perhaps unintentionally) the influence of postindustrial labor processes within a self-consciously oppositional poetics.

*Tjanting’s* emphasis on socioeconomic unrest is clearly a sign of the times. In 1980, the year Silliman finished the book, the American economy appeared to be in serious trouble. Over the course of the year, the country would officially enter a recession, unemployment would reach a record-setting rate of 7.5 percent, and interest rates would rise above 20 percent (Calleo 148–149). To make matters worse, oil prices had been rising since the early 1970s, and many Americans found themselves waiting in gas lines. In the October 1980 issue of *Monthly Review*, Paul M. Sweezy declared, “The view that American capitalism is in a period of crisis is now all but universal, shared alike by observers of all political and ideological persuasions” (Magdoff and Sweezy 178). A committed Marxist and prison reform activist, Silliman apparently agreed. As the final sentences of *Tjanting* indicate, he was far from optimistic about the social and ecological prospects of a nation dominated by the economics of postindustrial capitalism:

Forty-three percent of the world’s paper is produced in North America. A 12 year old patrols the street with a loaded submachine-gun. Helicopters buzz about the accident, flies at a carcass. The mayor views it all thru a pair of field glasses. Opera of demoralization. These are our baby pictures. I help you lift off your blouse. In America’s 213 major manufacturing industries, the top 4 companies in each field control an average of 42% of the market. They love to polish & putter with their RVs on the sidewalk. A greek chorus with wah-wah pedals. Condos, like a pueblo terraced on the hillside. Flat facts align assertions. Shelf-life of a book. I want to hear the terms of your resistance. Vertical gravel. If we all sleep together now, we’ll remember this moment forever. Punctuation is mortar. The song of the sprinklers on these well-trimmd lawns presents a false surface. What then?

An “Opera of demoralization” indeed. These disjunctive sentences depict excessive consumption, children carrying guns, spectacular violence, unresponsive political leadership, and monopolized industries, yet the
“false surface” of middle-class life remains undisturbed. People drive their RVs, build condos, and water their lawns. No wonder the poet asks, “What then?”

For Silliman, “there can be no such thing as a formal problem in poetry which is not a social one as well” (NS 173–174). In these last nineteen sentences of Tjanting, the social problem is evident: Late-capitalist culture produces middle-class complacency in the face of pressing social, economic, and ecological problems. Calling attention to the social problems of the postindustrial United States was central to Silliman’s poetic praxis in the 70s and 80s, as it was to many other poets associated with the Language movement. By the late 70s, this poetically and politically radical movement had begun to establish itself as a major avant-garde formation. In August 1978, Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein published the first issue of the New York-based poetics journal L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, which provided a forum for the movement’s theoretical and critical writings. At the same time, Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman, Barrett Watten, and others were involved in a thriving San Francisco Language scene that maintained its own network of little magazines and small presses. Silliman’s contribution to this late-century avant-garde was (and continues to be) substantial, in terms of both his poetry and his work as a theorist and editor. Tjanting and Silliman’s multivolume poem The Alphabet (2008) are two of the most ambitious (and, arguably, two of the most successful) long works produced by a Language writer; moreover, Silliman’s critical writing in The New Sentence (1987) and his editing of the anthology In the American Tree (1986) have substantially shaped public perceptions of the Language movement.

The well-known political engagement of the Language poets has tended to define them as a group and to inform the reception of their work. Like Antin, the Language poets have generally seen language and politics as inextricably intertwined. In fact, Silliman argues that “All behavior, including poetry, possesses a political dimension” (“Particulars” 47). This “political dimension” is as much at work in a poem like Tjanting as it is in more obviously activist writing:

If I write a newspaper story about landlord-tenant relations in San Francisco’s Tenderloin one day, an essay for L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E the next & work on my poem Tjanting the third, these relations shld be calld into play in ways that can be examind. The audience for the story will differ from those for either the essay or the poem, & I
imagine the audience for the essay to be more restricted (focused, if you will) than for *Tjanting*. Each, however, should lead the reader toward a general program (making tangible, for example, the ways in which capitalism harms & deforms every individual it touches within the relations that define each of these distinct relationships). (47–48)

This is precisely what Silliman does with *Tjanting*: He makes “tangible” the effects of capitalism on an American life in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Over the course of three years, following an exacting numerical constraint based on the Fibonacci number series, he filled notebook page after notebook page, sentence by sentence, with details drawn from his life in San Francisco. Extending to more than two hundred typed pages, *Tjanting* presents the poet’s perceptions of life in a postindustrial urban center, even as it resists traditional narrative strategies. Fragments of narrative and diverse material details and facts develop into recognizable themes with clear reference to Silliman’s surroundings; paradoxically, these themes are placed in emphasis by the disjunction of the form itself, which presents the events and minutiae of everyday life as a sort of recurring interruption to (and irruption within) the text.

In reading *Tjanting* as part of a procedural trajectory within postmodern poetry, I will be especially attentive to the ways in which Silliman’s procedure works to disrupt the placid surface of late capitalist culture. Georg Lukács argues that within “the particular rationalistic disciplines of bourgeois society,” “irrationality appears normally as an eruption, a cataclysm” (*History* 178). A related process is evident within *Tjanting*, where the real effects of postindustrial capitalism appear as a kind of irrational, inexplicable “eruption” within the text. And by “real,” I mean Lukács’s “real material substratum,” the “capitalist society with its internal antagonism between the forces and the relations of production” (10). “Reality” in a capitalist society is neither more nor less than the sum total of material and ideological conditions within which people sustain themselves through their labor. In Lukács’s words, “To posit oneself, to produce and reproduce oneself—that is reality” (15–16). In *Tjanting*, various symptoms of this reality—excessive consumption, the commodification of language through advertising, violent media spectacles—repeatedly and suddenly surface. It is as though the suppressed contradictions of the capitalist system begin—almost of their own accord—to manifest themselves as the real conditions within which we live and work.
The basic component of Silliman’s procedural form is the new sentence—a unit of poetic measure favored by the San Francisco Language poets. It is the primary building block of Tjanting’s larger structure, and it is defined by eight fundamental “qualities,” as Silliman explains in his “New Sentence” essay (NS 91). First of all, “The paragraph organizes the sentences” (91). Such an assertion might seem self-evident in a different context, but here it indicates both a preference for the prose poem over verse, and the rejection of a projectivist spatial arrangement of words on the page. New sentences are neither broken into lines, nor are they mimetic of the breath or any other vocal aspect of the poem. They are simply arranged into paragraphs, and (the second quality of the new sentence) each “paragraph is a unity of quantity, not logic or argument” (91). Thus, paragraph length is determined by the number of sentences involved, not by any ideal of logical or narrative continuity. Moreover, the new sentence itself need not be grammatically complete; it may be defined as whatever comes between periods. In Tjanting, “Sentence length is a unit of measure” (91); the presence or absence of a subject and verb is irrelevant. The result of such a definition is the use of some very odd sentences. Or, as Silliman puts it in his fourth point, “Sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity” (91). “Altered for torque” is a fine way to describe the consciously Steinian grammar games that Silliman plays in Tjanting. In “Composition as Explanation,” Gertrude Stein insists that “Beginning again and again and again explaining composition and time is a natural thing” (522). Silliman is only eight sentences into Tjanting when he introduces a similar notion: “Again & again I began” (15). This sentence foreshadows new sentences to come, for several pages later one encounters “This was again beginning” and “It was not beginning I began again” (17). The interplay of sound, sense, and syntax in these variations exemplifies the lexical “torque” that the new sentence displays.

The last four qualities of the new sentence all have to do with its resistance to logical development, or “syllogistic movement,” as Silliman calls it. He explains that, when employing the new sentence,

5) Syllogistic movement is: (a) limited; (b) controlled;
6) Primary syllogistic movement is between the preceding and following sentences;
7) Secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work;
8) The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader’s attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the sentence level or below. (NS 91)

Otherwise put, new sentences do not add up to a cohesive narrative or to a logical argument. There is inevitably a slippage of meaning from one sentence to the next, but at the level of three or more sentences, the linear development of meaning will start to fail.8 Perelman describes the antinarrative tendency of the new sentence as follows:

A new sentence is more or less ordinary itself, but gains its effect by being placed next to another sentence to which it has tangential relevance: new sentences are not subordinated to a larger narrative frame nor are they thrown together at random. Parataxis is crucial: the autonomous meaning of a sentence is heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences. (61)

Or in Silliman’s words again, “The new sentence is a decidedly contextual object. Its effects occur as much between, as within, sentences” (NS 92). Because the meaning of each “contextual object” depends on adjacent contextual objects, the meaning of the new sentence is never entirely self-contained. (For this reason, in quoting from Tjanting, I will occasionally reproduce relevant sentences in an expanded context, in order to retain the interstitial effects of the form.)

Tjanting is a metatextual work; it constantly reflects on the writing procedures used to produce it. In many ways, Silliman’s statements about the new sentence within Tjanting are more pedagogically useful than his “New Sentence” essay, in that the statements within the poem offer a simultaneous theorization and exemplification. That is, a new sentence about the new sentence both explains and instantiates itself: “Summer without sun some are with. Sentences recede the instant you think of them. Talk horses with old men in a sushi bar” (63). Between a pun and a quotidian scene, this meditation on the intangibility of the sentence provides its own demonstration. In thinking about the content of these sentences, one loses sight of their grammatical and syntactical
presence. “Talk horses with old men in a sushi bar” tends to become the description of an event, rather than an imperative, though this grammatical ambiguity is present. The linguistic materiality of the sentences does, indeed, recede. The rapidity with which readers move from one sentence to the next also contributes to this disappearance: “Dreams index fear. Each sentence points to the next. This motion tends to its own completion” (73). One sentence leads, or “points,” to another, and the reader looks for a “completion” or continuation of meaning in the progression from sentence to sentence. But the discontinuity of the new sentence form frustrates readerly expectations and calls closer attention to the individual sentences. Thus, “The function of this form is to contain the reading within the sentence” (133). There is no simple syllogistic or narrative move from “Dreams index fear” to “Each sentence points to the next.” Theoretically sophisticated readers might be reminded of poststructural psychoanalysis and its conception of the unconscious as structured like language, but this is meaning added, not inherent. The relation between these sentences—their “syllogistic movement”—is tangential, to use Perelman’s term. As Silliman puts it, “That sentences wld connect is leap of fate” (76).

Perelman’s observation that the new sentence is “more or less ordinary in itself” and that it depends upon its relation to other sentences for its effect could be summarized by an operational equation (derived from computer programming language) that appears in *Tjanting*: “A = A + 1, one being context” (90). For any given variable (A) of language, meaning will be dependent upon other, external values: the surrounding units of language. In terms of linguistics, such a claim is hardly novel. Sixty-five years before Silliman began work on *Tjanting*, Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* proffered the observation that “Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others” (721). But recognizing this linguistic fact and calling attention to it at the sentence level are two very different things. In practice, readers are accustomed to look for meaning as contained within individual language units. Or in Saussure’s terms, “Some people regard language, when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only—a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names” (718). In other words, it is the variable “A” that draws our attention, not the “+ 1” of context, which in fact determines meaning. The attempt to focus the reader’s attention on the production of meaning, and not just its effects, is no small undertaking. It involves a defamiliarization of the sentence that can seem disorienting or even
threatening: “We will look back on rain splatterd windows thru autumn soon. The sentence pauses long enough to rear its adder head up with a hiss in your direction, before settling back into the mottled camouflage of its words. It was like trying to word the mind wch had somehow slippd your find” (Tjanting 107). The new sentence is precisely a sentence that emerges from the camouflage of surrounding sentences to call attention to itself. In doing so, each new sentence functions as an “A” in itself and as the context for other new sentences. Thus, the progression of Tjanting involves a constant movement between “A” and “A + 1,” between the meaning of a sentence and the slippage of meaning from the surrounding sentences.10 To use another metaphor, a neighborhood is defined by its borders, and “Now we’re in the neighborhood of this sentence” (118).

**Informatizing Form**

If the new sentence is the basic structural unit of Tjanting, the arrangement of new sentences into paragraphs provides the larger structural logic behind the work. To determine the length of paragraphs, Silliman followed an exacting procedure based upon the Fibonacci number series.11 In a 1985 interview with Tom Beckett, he explained,

The essence of Fibonacci’s numbers is that each term is the sum of the two previous terms: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34…n. What initially attracted me to the series were three things: (1) it is the mathematical sequence most often found in nature, (2) each succeeding term is larger, and (3) the quantitative difference between terms is immediately perceptible, even when the quantities are of syllables or sentences. (35)

How the Fibonacci series works in practice is best illustrated by the first page of Tjanting, where the rapidly expanding paragraph length is still manageable:

    Not this.
    What then?
    I started over & over. Not this.
    Last week I wrote “the muscles in my palm so sore from halving the rump roast I cld barely grip the pen.” What then? This morning my lip is blisterd.

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Of about to within which. Again & again I began. The gray light of day fills the yellow room in a way wch is somber. Not this. Hot grease had spilld on the stove top.

Nor that either. Last week I wrote “the muscle at thumb’s root so taut from carving that beef I thought it wld cramp.” Not so. What then? Wld I begin? This morning my lip is tender, disfigurd. I sat in an old chair out behind the anise. I cld have gone about this some other way. (15)

Beginning with two one-sentence paragraphs, Silliman constructs subsequent paragraphs in which the total number of sentences equals the sum of the sentences in the preceding two paragraphs. The third paragraph has \((1 + 1 =)\) two sentences; the fourth has \((1 + 2 =)\) three sentences; the fifth has \((2 + 3 =)\) five sentences; and the sixth has \((3 + 5 =)\) eight sentences, and so on. For Silliman, “[T]he most important aspect of the Fibonacci series turned out not to be those gorgeous internal relationships, but the fact that it begins with two ones” (Interview 36). This initial numerical parity “not only permitted the parallel articulation of two sequences of paragraphs, but also determined that their development would be uneven, punning back to the general theory of class struggle” (36). Thus, for Silliman, the Fibonacci constraint seems to serve two purposes: (1) It structures two separate paragraph sequences, and (2) it represents an attempt to make a political allegory out of the uneven numerical development of these sequences.

Putting aside for a moment the question of Tjanting as an allegory of class relations, I would like to suggest that the Fibonacci constraint has a more fundamental significance: It represents what Daniel Bell calls an “intellectual technology.” In *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (1973), Bell surmises that “a new intellectual technology” has the potential to become “as salient in human affairs as machine technology has been for the past century and a half” (28). He defines this new technology as follows:

> An *intellectual* technology is the substitution of algorithms (problem-solving rules) for intuitive judgments. These algorithms may be embodied in an automatic machine or a computer program or a set of instructions based on some statistical or mathematical formula; the statistical and logical techniques that are used in dealing with “organized complexity” are efforts to formalize a set of decision rules. (29–30)
Tjanting’s form is precisely the result of “a set of instructions based on some statistical or mathematical formula.” The Fibonacci procedure, then, can be thought of as an inherently postindustrial mode of intellectual production. As we have seen with Berrigan and Antin, the procedure does allow for authorial volition, but the larger structure of Silliman’s poem replaces “intuitive judgments” with “problem-solving rules.”12 Once the constraint is in place, the general shape of the poem is fixed and predictable. The ellipses in Silliman’s interview with Beckett imply as much. Silliman explains that the first paragraph sequence “contains paragraphs with 1, 2, 5, 13…4181 sentences each,” while the second contains “1, 3, 8, 21…2584” (Interview 36). The particular intellectual technology that Silliman puts to use also employs enormous amounts of repetition. In designing his formal procedure, Silliman decided that “[e]ach paragraph would repeat every sentence of its previous occurrence” and that “the repeats would be rewritten so as to reveal their constructedness, their artificiality as elements of meaning, their otherness” (36). Thus, the first sentence of the poem, “Not this,” is repeated in the third and fifth paragraphs. “I started over & over”—the first sentence of the third paragraph—becomes “Again & again I began” in the fifth. “What then?”, which first appears in the second paragraph, is repeated in the fourth and sixth. In the fourth paragraph, the following sentence first appears: “Last week I wrote ‘the muscles in my palm so sore from halving the rump roast I cld barely grip the pen.” In the sixth paragraph, this sentence becomes “Last week I wrote ‘the muscle at thumb’s root so taut from carving that beef I though it wld cramp.’” And the fourth-paragraph sentence “This morning my lip is blisterd” becomes “This morning my lip is tender, disfigurd” in the sixth paragraph. The effect of such repetition with a difference is, first of all, to reinforce the formulaic aspect of Tjanting. Though we do not know precisely how each sentence will be revised, we come to expect some sort of revision. Moreover—to reiterate Silliman’s argument—these revisions highlight the “constructedness” and “artificiality” of the sentences. This foregrounding of artifice has an important ideological function, in that it challenges the supposedly natural language of realism. In Charles Bernstein’s words,

“Artifice” is a measure of a poem’s intractability to being read as the sum of its devices & subject matters. In this sense, “artifice” is the contradiction of “realism,” with its insistence on presenting an unmediated
(immediate) experience of facts, either of the “external” world of nature or the “internal” world of the mind. (“Artifice” 3)

Yet Silliman has not abandoned the narration of factual experience or of the external world. To the contrary, the “successive increase in sheer mass” created by the Fibonacci progression “is felt by a reader as a powerful index of narrative (i.e., meaningful) development” (Interview 35). But this development of meaning is self-conscious. The artifice involved in the repetitive redaction of sentences reminds readers that language mediates the world of *Tjanting*.

As for *Tjanting*’s allegorical structure, it ostensibly calls attention to class conflict. Discussing the “original impulse” behind *Tjanting*, Silliman told Beckett that he had been pondering a certain question for five years (35):

[W]hat would class struggle look like, viewed as a form? Would such a form be useable in writing? Given the pervasive and extraordinary force with which the constant competition between social classes helps to shape our lives, a form which could reproduce (however dimly) these dynamics would seem to offer an articulate vehicle through which to explore just this problem of “shaping,” of how these exterior events act upon and enter into the subjective in order to create the Subject. (Interview 35)

Evidently, the answer to Silliman’s second question (“Would such a form be useable in writing?”) is yes. But his first question (“what would class struggle look like, viewed as a form?”) gestures toward a more complicated problem. How exactly does Silliman’s Fibonacci procedure relate to “the general theory of class struggle”? As we will see, the disjunctive subject matter of the poem does indeed mount a critique of the values of a postindustrial society. But the form itself—the dual sequence of paragraphs expanding and permuting in accordance with the Fibonacci series—has no inherent relation to class struggle. Nor does the text itself direct us in any coherent fashion to read allegorically. We might take Silliman’s paratextual comments as a directive to initiate a transcoding operation whereby we substitute the language of class struggle for the formula of the poem, but such a reading is not very satisfactory. I would argue that, for our Jamesonian transcoding operation to be compelling,
there must also be some compelling relationship between the codes in question. Reading procedural poetry as a commentary on postindustrial labor works because writing poetry is a form of mental labor. But Silliman’s class allegory offers no such clear connection. True, the form provides an alternative to the conventional realism of the novel, a genre that is historically linked to bourgeois ideology. And we could, following Silliman’s paratextual comments, choose to identify the two alternating series of sentences with the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. But such a reading only works in the vaguest terms. Which series is supposed to be the bourgeoisie, and which the proletariat? At what point would this formal allegory resolve itself into the classless society predicted by Marx? Is Marx’s industrial-era, binary class scheme still relevant in a postindustrial economy? And perhaps most importantly, what connects this particular form to class, other than Silliman’s comments? Could we not just as easily read this form as a gender allegory, for example?

Although Silliman’s own formal reading may be suspect, I would still maintain that the procedure behind *Tjanting* may be productively read within a larger social framework. As we have seen in previous chapters, the generalized labor conditions of postindustrial society inevitably affect poets, like everyone else. Bell even suggests that, “By creating and extending a technical intelligentsia,” postindustrial society “raises crucial questions about the relation of the technical to the literary intellectual” (43). In the form of *Tjanting*, we see this problematic at work. Silliman, who would later make a living as a computer analyst, incorporates the intellectual technology of postindustrial society into his procedure. Within this society,

the manipulation of symbols and information along the model of computer operation is extremely widespread. In an earlier era workers learned how to act like machines both inside and outside the factory…. Today we increasingly think like computers, while communication technologies and their model of interaction are becoming more and more central to laboring activities. (Hardt and Negri 290–291)

In short, write Hardt and Negri, “Just as modernization did in a previous era, postmodernization or informatization today marks a new mode of becoming human” (289). It should be no surprise, then, that this new way of becoming human would infiltrate the poetry of the era, or that
organic free verse would seem outmoded to Silliman and other Language poets. The critical function of Silliman’s form is not so much to foreground class struggle as it is to foreground labor conditions themselves, and to foreground the fact that even the most avant-garde, oppositional poetics develops in accordance with the larger socioeconomic trends of late stage capitalism. Reading *Tjanting*, one confronts a shining example of cultural production under postindustrial constraints—and not just laboring constraints, but living constraints as well. This repetitive, formulaic and also vastly engaging prose poem is the result of Hardt and Negri’s “new mode of becoming human.” Here, in *Tjanting*’s “informatized” procedure, is a new, postmodern way of thinking, of being. To some extent, the poem functions as an instantiation of what it sets out to critique, and this very fact becomes part of its critique. This is not to say, however, that the intention behind the form is irrelevant. *Tjanting* is deeply and intentionally critical of inequities and injustices in postindustrial society, and the political critique that exists at the level of subject matter is made possible by the form itself. In Silliman’s words, “My formalism marks a new content” (154). But as in the work of any poet or artist, historical distance clarifies the significance of new formal developments. Three decades after Silliman began writing *Tjanting*, we are in a position to see both the intentional challenge issued by the poem and the ways in which the poem is unconsciously or unintentionally shaped by larger socioeconomic forces. Though Silliman may not have set out to incorporate a postindustrial intellectual technology into his poem, the fact that he did so increases the critical value of his work. For in reading *Tjanting*, we see postindustrial society and postmodern American culture turning on themselves.

“The reality level of the news is zero.”

“Of all the so-called Language poets,” George Hartley writes, “Ron Silliman has carried on the most sustained analysis of the interplay of realism and reification” (62). In Silliman’s critical writing—especially in his essay “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World”—this analysis functions primarily as a critique of realism for its collusion with capitalism. For Silliman,

What happens when a language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development is an anaesthetic transformation of the
perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its expository, descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of “realism,” the illusion of reality in capitalist thought. These developments are tied directly to the function of reference in language, which under capitalism is transformed, narrowed into referentiality. (NS 10)

In Silliman’s assessment, realism—the dominant literary mode of capitalism—causes readers to stop paying attention to words in and of themselves and to pay attention instead only to the meanings behind them. The reader no longer notices the signifier, and only notices the signified. The problem with this shifting of attention is that signifiers are the actual units of production in writing. The writer composes a text of signifiers, and if one only notices the signifieds, one no longer has an awareness of the labor that has gone into the production of writing. To reify the product of one’s labor without considering the labor itself is to be alienated from one’s own labor, to fall into the trap of commodity fetishism, that “specific problem of our age, the age of modern capitalism” (Lukács 84). Yet it is important to emphasize that Silliman does not valorize the signifier in isolation, either. He does not propose a complete disjunction between the material signifier and the referential signified. He argues for “reference” over “referentiality”—for an awareness of the movement between word and thing, rather than a fetishization of the thing represented. Poetry facilitates this awareness. As a genre, it has traditionally tended to call attention to the signifier’s work as a pointing device; the artificiality of poetic rhyme and meter has tended to prevent a too-facile realist move between signifier and signified. According to Silliman, “[I]t is the disappearance of the word that lies at the heart of the invention of the illusion of realism and the breakdown of gestural poetic form” (NS 12). Thus, the self-conscious gesture—the linguistic act of signifier pointing to signified without creating the false impression of the indissolubility of the two terms—is central to his materialist poetics.

Silliman’s critique of realism enacts itself within Tjanting. For example, realism is indicted for its cultural (or superstructural) reinforcement of political oppression: “Realism can only reinforce oppression—no art is representational” (112). Here artistic representation becomes a sort of linguistic or imagistic imprisonment. To represent is to reduce, to reify. Moreover, “no art is representational”—realism will never be true to its
subject matter, in that no signifier is ever identical with its signified. To imply otherwise is to “reinforce oppression.” But in reading realist fiction, one easily slips into the world of representations without marking the inherent resistance of language to such representational work: “Some books read themselves in front of you, while you merely listen” (75). The reflexive quality of the books in question turns the reader into a passive consumer of text. Such works remove the reader from even the most superficial encounter with the materiality of language. The experience of interpreting signifiers on a page is reduced to an experience of mental listening. Dematerialized signifieds replace material signifiers, and, in Silliman’s words, the disappearance of the word brings about the appearance of the world.\textsuperscript{18} In Silliman’s words, “Fiction’s first task was narrative & its second the syntagmatic” (102). The historical function of fiction is the exact obverse of the new sentence, which first foregrounds the syntagmatic relation between individual sentences. In this sense, \textit{Tjanting} embodies a critique of realism at the formal level.

Yet Silliman’s critique of realism represents only one half of his complicated textual relationship to the material real. As Hank Lazer indicates, “Discussions of Language Writing have often overemphasized the assault on varieties of representation and mimesis, failing to note as well the projection of a new realism” (vol. 2, 30). With regard to the Language movement as a whole, the complexity of the critique of realism has become especially apparent since the publication of Hejinian’s \textit{Language of Inquiry} (2000). In the chapter “Two Stein Talks,” Hejinian—far from dismissing literary realism—argues that “it is precisely a special way of writing that realism requires” (89). As for Silliman, though he has roundly criticized realism as an “-ism,” he has also continually attempted to depict the social conditions within which he lives and works. In fact, Silliman’s use of procedural form is in part an attempt to find a means of writing adequate to the real as it emerges within contemporary society:

All poetry is formalist, the intervention of forms into the real, the transformation of the real into forms. But the real is social, discontinuous, unstable and opaque. Against that, any fixed poetics (any valorized, codified set of procedures) is necessarily a falsification. It is the moment at which the real generates new forms that the real itself becomes visible. The problem of procedures is how to keep the problem manifest. (Silliman, Interview 34)
If traditional realism is no longer adequate to the complexities of a post-industrial capitalist world, then it is necessary to make new formal interventions. And this is precisely what Tjanting does: Its progression of new sentences allows for an up-to-date exploration of “social, discontinuous, unstable and opaque” reality.

One of the most effective means Silliman employs to get at the real is his inclusion of what, in a different context, Roland Barthes calls “concrete reality” (146). In the essay “The Reality Effect,” Barthes defines concrete reality as a category represented by an assemblage of “insignificant gestures, transitory attitudes, insignificant objects, redundant words” (146). Individual instances of concrete reality are, paradoxically, resistant to realistic depiction in that “[t]he pure and simple ‘representation’ of the ‘real,’ the naked relation of ‘what is’ (or has been)…appears as a resistance to meaning.” Moreover, concrete reality and the details that signify it are ultimately disruptive to realistic narrative because they efface the signified, the unmediated representation of which is the whole point of traditional realism:

Semiotically, the “concrete detail” is constituted by the direct collusion of a referent and a signifier; the signified is expelled from the sign, and with it, of course, the possibility of developing a form of the signified, i.e., narrative structure itself. (Realistic literature is narrative, of course, but that is because its realism is only fragmentary, erratic, confined to “details,” and because the most realistic narrative imaginable develops along unrealistic lines.) (147–148)

In short, the real is a disruption to realism. Realist fiction cannot directly and continuously present the real, because the real does not unfold according to realistic plot structures. Silliman’s new realism, on the other hand, attempts what fiction typically does not: the representation of the real in the absence of a plot structure. To the extent that a narrative emerges in Tjanting, it is a narrative comprised solely of disjunctive details. The effect of such details is not traditional realism, yet it creates a strong sense of connection to contemporary reality. Hence, Michel Delville’s description of Silliman’s poem Paradise is also applicable to Tjanting:

Despite the unusual lack of narrative, contextual, or even imagistic coherence in the traditional sense, Silliman’s Paradise manages to create an extremely vivid and successful picture of contemporary
America, or rather a series of snaps, that is anything but abstract or referential. (200)

Similarly, Hartley finds that “in *Tjanting* Silliman draws a portrait of the daily life of a poet in San Francisco in the late 1970s–early 1980s” (8). In effect, we might say that Silliman discards conventional realism in favor of something more real.

Perhaps the best example of concrete reality in *Tjanting* comes from Silliman’s inclusion of signage. Time and again, he presents the self-referential language of signs and advertisements in his work. He inscribes in the poem words that, to borrow again from Barthes, “say nothing but this: *we are the real*” (148): “In the rain Spain falls mainly on the brain. Gold-leaf sign on the glass reads X-ray. Gray sky comes into the yellow room” (*Tjanting* 20). The absence of quotation marks around “X-ray” is telling. The word is not a quote—a reference to another discourse; it is rather the same signifier from the window reproduced in a different context. Sandwiched between a jumbled exercise in English diction and an unrelated reference to an indoor scene, the gold letters of “X-ray” stand out as a concrete detail of real life—the sort of detail one notices without necessarily registering while walking in the city or riding the bus. (And in fact Silliman wrote much of *Tjanting* while riding public transportation in the Bay area.) A public restroom furnishes another one-word irruption of the real: “Boar bristle hair brush. Toilet’s handle says ‘press.’ These letters more angular than I used to write” (22). Here the quotation marks around “press” have the simultaneously unsettling and amusing effect of giving the toilet’s handle a sort of coercive agency. (Perhaps perversely, I am reminded of the signage on the cake in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.) Like the X-ray sign, the handle serves as a concrete detail that synecdochically invokes its surroundings (public restroom, etc.). The further construction of the scene is left to the (in)discretion of the reader, but the detail itself implies a “real” context. Moreover, the repetition inherent in Silliman’s procedure leads to a constant foregrounding of formal artifice. When the toilet’s handle returns, it does so in a new set of syntactical relations: “Rush of traffic scatters gutter’s papers. ‘Press’ sez toilet’s handle, metal button. That cane not as an aid in walking, but against the possibilities of urban life” (33). Presumably, one is dealing with the same toilet handle, but its new context presents a grittier reality: litter, waste, the danger of moving through a city. The labeling on the handle seems less amusing and more redundant, even pointless. It is a “metal button,” after all. How else would one operate such a device?
While some signs of the real seem whimsical and even jocular (“Over the sign’s list announcing cappuccino, au lait, mocha, espresso, doubles & iced cappuccinos, these words in red: no regular coffee”; 129), others develop into social critique: “Fading stores of appliance signs. Tall sturdy avocado plant. No negamos credito—red white blue plastic flags on radio antennas (antennae) in a used car lot” (68). In a run-down neighborhood, a used car lot identifies predatory lending with American identity. The plastic flags point to the shabbiness of the patriotic advertising, while the linguistic tension in the sentence points back to class. The sign itself (which omits the accent in the word “crédito,” and which translates as “We won’t deny you credit”) is clearly intended to attract the business of Spanish speakers with credit problems or without credit records. Meanwhile, Silliman points to his own linguistic advantages by correcting the anglicized form of “antennas” with the Latin plural “antennae”—an act that highlights cultural capital. The critique inherent in these few sentences is brief but complex. By naming a few objects and reproducing a few words from the urban milieu, Silliman calls attention to socioeconomic inequity. However, the myriad concrete details of Tjanting do not always resolve themselves into a clearly legible critical discourse. If the real is inherently resistant to narrative, as Barthes suggests, then we should expect the text of Tjanting to frustrate our attempts to incorporate it into our own critical narratives. At the same time, the fact that the poem’s new realism challenges easy comprehension does not mean that the real itself is simply meaningless. Rather, the signs of the real—the concrete details that represent it—do not disappear into meaning. Perhaps this resistance inherent in reality explains why “The reality level of the news is zero” (Tjanting 118). Newspapers and newscasts place the concrete details of the real within comprehensible narratives. But reality is not comprehensible without a struggle. Realism may read itself before the mind’s eye, but the real does not. It emerges from a negotiation between reader and writer that takes place at the level of the text. We might say, then, that Silliman’s new realism, with its use of discontinuous concrete details—requires the reader to take part in the production of meaning. In short, reading in this new form involves shared labor.

“The universe situated between a & the.”

In considering the function of form in Silliman’s Ketjak (1978) and Tjanting, Stephen Fredman suggests that the language of these poems “comprises a self-enclosed world, yet one inexhaustibly permeable by an
outside reality” (146). This concept of permeability is a useful metaphor for a form that is, ultimately, limited only by the number of periods it contains. Tjanting’s formal permeability allows Silliman to introduce content without concern for narrative cohesion, although the content does tend to resolve itself into various disjunctive micronarratives and themes. In turning now to a closer examination of content, I will focus primarily on those narrative and thematic elements that are most reflective of the poem’s formal ingenuity. That is, I will be especially concerned with subject matter that highlights the dialectical relationship between form and content, by which I mean Jameson’s theory that “either term can be translated into the other” (Form 403). When Silliman alludes to the influence of other poets, he implicitly points to the genealogy of his form. When he includes jarring depictions of spectacular violence—depictions that would be difficult if not impossible to duplicate in lyrical free verse—he gestures to the permeability of the form. It is precisely such formally reflexive content that I will be investigating in the second half of this chapter.

Writers do not invent new forms in an aesthetic vacuum, and Silliman encodes his influences within the poem. His recurring references to the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and Louis Zukofsky are especially interesting, in that they suggest a modernist lineage within which to situate Silliman’s own postmodern formal developments. Williams’s fascination with everyday language and objects begs comparison to Silliman’s treatment of quotidian San Francisco, and Silliman emphasizes this connection early in Tjanting: “Pilots & meteorologists disagree about the sky. The figure five figures in. The way new shoots stretch out” (15). Here the “figure five” invokes Williams’s “The Great Figure,” a short attempt to capture in poetic form the speed of urban life: “Among the rain / and lights / I saw the figure 5 / in gold / on a red / firetruck / moving / tense / unheeded / to gong clangs / siren howls / and wheels rumbling / through the dark city” (Williams 36). Like Silliman’s disjointed sentence sequence, Williams’s line-breaks serve first and foremost to defamiliarize language. Without the line breaks, the poem would consist of one grammatically unremarkable sentence. The division of lines emulates the poet’s capacity to process his perceptions, to take in the scene. Startled into awareness, he first apprehends a specific signifier (the number five in gold) and only afterward recognizes what this number signifies (a particular fire truck). Of itself, the number five has no special symbolic meaning; in Williams’s poem it functions as a concrete detail, a realist gesture. In Silliman’s poem, on the other hand, the
figure five functions synecdochically to recall Williams’s radical experiments with poetic language. In his critical writing, Silliman is quick to acknowledge Williams’s influence (“The sole precedent I can find for the new sentence is *Kora in Hell*”; *NS* 63), and so Silliman is quite right to assert that “The figure five figures in.” Of course, once the “figure five” becomes part of *Tjanting*, it takes on a life of its own, morphing from “Five figures figure five” (16) to “Five five figure figures” (24) to “I saw the figure 5 in gold” (83) to “(S) figure 55” (87). This last sentence has been “altered for torque” to the extent that its relation to those preceding is called into question. The overall effect of this syntactic scrambling is both to acknowledge Williams’ influence and demonstrate Silliman’s development beyond this influence. The postmodern deconstruction of sentence form that takes place in *Tjanting* makes Williams’s enjambments look tame by comparison, and Silliman accentuates the difference by performing this deconstruction on Williams’s own words.

Pound’s influence is similarly incorporated into *Tjanting*, although in his case the treatment is more distant and parodic. Silliman both acknowledges Pound’s influence and mocks his epic seriousness. The particular Poundian citation Silliman works with is the first line from the *Cantos*, which Silliman presents between a description of a lampshade and a cryptic statement about aleatory procedure: “Hanging from the high ceiling (never used) of the yellow room, tassled green shade over a lamp. & then went down to the ships. An accidental chance is not order” (53). Though altered slightly from Pound’s “And then went down to the ship,” the sentence is nevertheless easily recognizable (*Cantos* 3). Though the reference to a showy but underutilized room could be construed as a comment on the aesthetic value of the *Cantos*, the citation itself is neutral. However, the permutations that this citation goes through are something else. “& then went down to the shop, set key to deadbolt” (64) transfers Pound’s neoclassicism to a contemporary, commercial milieu, with an evidently satirical result. Near the end of the poem the line becomes nothing more than a lewd joke: “& then went down on the sheep” (189). If Silliman’s aim is to deflate Pound’s heroic rhetoric, he is successful. Yet he does not dismiss Pound entirely: “The people a board & I a hammer. Reading the Cantos backwards. Antarctic, ten percent of the earth’s surface, holds more than 85% of all its fresh water, caked in ice” (202). Reading the *Cantos* backward suggests a reading against the grain, perhaps against Pound’s political development, and certainly against Pound’s own sense of sequence. It is an active, constructivist reading, and yet it is still a reading of Pound.
It seems that Silliman is distancing himself from Poundian epic pretensions while still acknowledging a formal debt. After all, if, as Fredman asserts, Silliman’s form is “inexhaustibly permeable,” the same is true of Pound’s lifework. Politics and subject matter divide Pound’s modernism from Silliman’s post-, but the formal distance between the inclusion of historical fragments and the inclusion of contemporary fragments is not immense. Thus, while Pound’s neoclassicism and cultural conservatism are in direct opposition to Silliman’s political concerns, Silliman is still the inheritor of a Poundian aesthetic. In his words, “What then? Our age begins with Pound. Music rang above the telephones” (106).

Whatever ambivalence Silliman manifests for the Poundian tradition as a whole, it does not carry over to his treatment of Zukofsky. Throughout *Tjanting*, Silliman pays homage to this seminal Objectivist poet and theorist, and he does so without the irony with which he approaches Pound’s work. Silliman’s desire to affiliate himself with Objectivist poetry is not surprising, given the proximity of his poetics to Zukofsky’s materialist writing praxis. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain have situated Silliman within a group of contemporary, Objectivist-influenced poets who “are, in an enlarged sense, realists and materialists” (3). Moreover, DuPlessis and Quartermain note that “the term ‘Objectivist’ has come to mean a non-symbolist, post-imagist poetics, characterized by a historical, realist, antitymological worldview” in which individual details point “to the materiality of both the world and the word” (3). This definition certainly fits Silliman’s writing. He is operating within an Objectivist version of postmodernism, and he calls attention to this fact with his allusions to Zukofsky. For example, Silliman works a citation from Zukofsky’s sestina “Mantis” into *Tjanting*: “Mantis, end stop, the power of the poor” (27); “Mantis, stop, the poor end of the power” (46); “Power the poor mantis of the end stop” (99). Compare these sentences to the final tercet of “Mantis”:

Fly, mantis, on the poor, arise like leaves  
The armies of the poor, strength: stone on stone  
And build the new world in your eyes, Save it! (Zukofsky, CSP 66)

The revolutionary rhetoric—already quite condensed in Zukofsky’s poem—is even more so in Silliman’s revision. While Silliman’s sentence “Mantis, end stop, the power of the poor” never actually appears in “Mantis” (nor is the word “mantis” ever the final word—the “end
stop”—of any line) Silliman has captured the rousing rhythm of Zukofsky’s exhortation. Yet while “Mantis, end stop, the power of the poor” could easily have been written by Zukofsky, Silliman’s later, torqued version of the line moves beyond the Zukofskian level of syntactic distortion: “Power the poor mantis of the end stop.” In its scrambled form as a new sentence, the line becomes a remarkable example of intertextuality. While it will inevitably recall Zukofsky’s poem for many readers, the line has also been reworked—“altered for torque”—in such a way that it exemplifies Silliman’s own procedure. The language is no longer a mere citation or quotation, nor is it fully absorbed by the text.21

While some references to Zukofsky are oblique or merely topical (“The universe situated between a & the” [121]; “Zukofsky smoking Kents” [142]), Silliman’s allusion to “A”-7 highlights an important link between the poets: Both inscribe their versions of realism using a syntactically convoluted and materially dense language. “Per doubld haps. Louis Zukofsky sees a horse. A word for museums,” Silliman writes, referring to the sonnet sequence in which Zukofsky imaginatively turns a pair of street barricades into horses (Tjanting 142). The first sonnet of Zukofsky’s “A”-7 describes “Horses” that “have no manes” and “have no eyes, for their legs are wood, / For their stomachs are logs with print on them” (“A” 39). These horses have “red lamps” around their “necks or where could / Be necks,” and “two legs stand A, four together M.” Eight lines into the poem, Zukofsky finally identifies these imaginary horses as construction barricades: “‘Street Closed’ is what print says on their stomachs.” It seems that “Louis Zukofsky sees a horse” does not describe a sensory experience so much as an act of verbal transformation. As Zukofsky writes in the next sonnet, “No horse is here, no horse is there? / Says you! Then I—fellow me, airs! we’ll make / Wood horse, and recognize it with our words—” (39). It requires only—and precisely—words to turn “logs with print on them” into “stomachs,” to turn wooden sawhorses into living horses with manes, necks, and legs. But the particular words that Zukofsky uses are part of a dense, syntactically torqued texture, not a self-effacing, standardized prose sequence.

Silliman seems especially interested in Zukofsky’s use of the letter “A” as a material shape (“two legs stand A”), for elsewhere he writes, “The rain falls at an angle. This brings to our attention a sequence of ‘A’s. Later he will change this, or he already has” (Tjanting 49). In “A”-7, the comparison of two “A”-shapes to an “M” literally calls our attention to the materiality of the letters, to their shape on the page. In an odd
way, the materiality of these letters transfers to the wooden sawhorses. As the letters become more material, more “real,” the things that they represent do too. This is a technique that Silliman himself employs in Tjanting, and—perhaps not by coincidence—he does so using the letter “Z”: “Holding a match at the tip of one’s fingers. Z-form, the rungs of fire escape connects landings. Downstairs, hushd voices, scurrying footsteps, day’s rise raises eyes” (35). Later, the “Z-form” sentence reappears in the following context: “Small dry ridges of an upper lip. Landings cannot escape the Z-form rungs of fire. Any old thing I can think of” (67). Given Silliman’s indirect reference to the “A”-form of the sawhorse barricades, I would argue that his “Z-form” fire escape points not only to a precise metallic shape but also to an Objectivist poetics of material realism that begins with Zukofsky. In The New Sentence, Silliman places a short essay on Zukofsky within a chapter entitled “Z-Sited Path”; thus “Z” has a synecdochic force in Silliman’s writing. The “Z-form” refers to an Objectivist poetic praxis that simultaneously acknowledges the materiality of letters on the page and their signifying function as part of words and sentences that point to the real. “Z-form” writing highlights “the materiality of both the world and the word,” in DuPlessis and Quartermain’s language (3). It seems that, for Silliman, reality effects are related to the materiality of the signifier. Words become more material, more palpable as part of the same process in which the external world takes shape within the text. The work of both Zukofsky and Silliman demonstrates a linguistic realism that—unlike the representational realism of fiction—operates first and foremost at the surface level of the text.

“Hard to think of words in scrawl as object”

In Silliman’s writing praxis, the materiality of the word is more than a metaphor. Tjanting constantly references the material conditions of its own construction—the moments at which the written word actually materializes on the page. Referring to Silliman’s Paradise, Delville argues that the “many explicit references to the act of writing” in the poem “give the whole an air of self-reflexiveness . . . in which the author sees to it that readers experience the poem as if it were being written in front of their eyes” (200). In Tjanting, this same self-reflexivity is at work, and it highlights what Delville calls “the ‘real’ circumstances of (and impediments to) the writing process” (198). These real circumstances return so insistently that Tjanting’s primary subject matter often
Postmodern American Poetry seems to be its own production. At the most fundamental level, the self-reflexive nature of the writing process results in a foregrounding of labor. The poem constantly points to the fact that a poet has put his work into it, word by word, sentence by sentence. The moment of composition becomes simultaneously the object of description: “Run against light to catch the bus. Riding, writing. Heads of hair dot the air” (27). Public transportation—usually no more than a passage between two places, an intermediary duration—functions here as a site for the production of text (and perhaps for its consumption as well, in that “Riding, writing” can be read as a double pun, a reference to Robert Duncan’s Writing Writing [1952] and also to the poet Laura Riding). The poet’s workplace has become the anonymous space of a metro bus, one of the few remaining public spaces in an era of privatization. Within this space, the presence of others becomes one more pretext for writing, as individuals blur into a sort of pointillistic or impressionistic experience of visual texture: “Heads of hair dot the air.” At other times, the act of writing eclipses the larger site of production, and nothing remains but an author-function defined by a pen: “If no sideburns, then a hairpiece. Holding pen down, veins at the wrist stand up. When we go to where clouds are, they’re too thin to see” (33). And yet the pen is not quite disembodied, either. Metonymically, the wrist leads back to the body of the author, who remains the closest approximation to a unifying principle behind the poem’s disjunctive sentences. An autobiographical impulse remains, shadowing the text with an authorial presence: “Shadow of my hand over these words” (39). This productive presence makes itself felt at the most material level of the text: “They seem to walk with jagged hurriedness. This script scrawld. What morning is to the cyclamen” (58–59). The scrawl is the trace of production, the mark of the author’s labor (quite literally manual labor). Yet the “scrawld” script remains only at the level of the signified, not the signifier, because the medium of print has interceded: “Tar pulleys on a roof lift. Letters, words more crowded in spots, jamm’d cluster’d, evend out thru print’s filter” (84). Silliman reminds us that the print was once script, but the human shape of the script itself—the trace of labor—is lost. Paradoxically, the loss of the hand-written script—an intimate record of human production—becomes a constant presence in Tjanting. It is a loss that never recedes. As one reads the bound and printed text, one recalls previous stages of production: “Write this down in a red notebook. Foglike slugbank heavy on the beach. A smudge of grease at the left margin, a thumbprint” (62). This is an apt image for the poet’s textual presence—a thumbprint. He
has encoded his own process into the text, and it remains as a kind of residue of production that prevents the easy commodification of the poem. In fact, *Tjanting* is a very difficult commodity to fetishize, in that it always recalls the labor that constitutes it (“183 sentences in 15 days” [136]). The reader relates not to an object but to the documentation of a process—which is to say, to work: “Hard to think of words in scrawl as object” (137). And it is difficult to forget that the poem is written, not just writing. Invisible, “not seen” labor manifests itself: “The architecture of billboards, fire escapes, back stairs (culture of the not seen). I sit in the morning sun, sipping coffee, popping knuckles, whispering these words out loud as I jot them down” (120). By inviting the reader to observe the conventionally isolated act of writing, Silliman turns the text itself into an exercise in collaboration: “Together, we read these words with one set of eyes. Where perhaps it was some morning. The act of jotting these marks on paper organizes the whole of my life” (106). If the act of production structures a life, then making this act manifest is a gesture of openness far more radical than the performative revelations of (neo-)confessional verse. After all, tortured revelations and late-night confessions are always theatrical. Labor is personal. It involves the conversion of one’s energy into commodities or services or—in the case of literary production—into a text to be shared with the reader.

In returning “again & again” to the production of writing, Silliman makes his formal procedure part of the reality that he catalogues in *Tjanting*. “It goes into a pocket pad in snatches,” he writes of his writing, “then is honed & set into a fixed context in a journal, then is typed & later typeset” (110). Even the ratio of notebook to typed page is recorded: “One page of notebook equals 1.8 pages of double-spaced type” (159). Though far removed from the realism of the novel, such textual reflexivity indicates a profound commitment to the recording of reality. The material conditions of production—the concrete details of writing—never disappear into narrative. Rather, the foregrounding of the poet’s labor serves as a constant reminder that narrative is produced and not merely experienced. While conventional realism allows for unreflective consumption of a plot, Silliman’s discontinuous narrative lays bare the labor involved in the production of the text. The notebook, the pen, the typewriter, the typed page—all the instruments of writing double as the subject matter of writing in an endlessly self-reflexive praxis. In Silliman’s postmodern realism, the mental and manual labor of textual production and the material form of the text are indispensable parts of the reality that is to be depicted.
“Fast food means orange decor.”

Language is a contested field within *Tjanting*. The poem’s very inclusiveness creates a tension among its various discursive registers. References to structuralist linguistics contrast with allusions to popular music. High modernist citations contrast with references to San Francisco street life. What’s more, Silliman interjects brand names and business logos into the text. In light of this deployment of advertising language, C. D. Wright’s assertion that poetry is fundamentally at odds with advertising begs further analysis. “Poetry and advertising (the basest mode of which is propaganda) are in direct and total opposition,” Wright explains in “A Taxable Matter,” an essay that deals briefly with *Tjanting*. “If you do not use language you are used by it” (241). But is it ever possible to “use” the language of advertising without turning the poem into a literary billboard? Silliman asks this question implicitly with his inclusion of branded language. The stakes of such an inquiry are perhaps higher than they first appear. If one concedes that the language of advertising will forever remain anathema to poetry, one is conceding that a crucial aspect of postindustrial culture is simply off-limits for the poet. In effect, by ceding the language of advertising, the poet is tacitly admitting that poetic labor cannot transform commodified language into any form that might serve the poet’s ideological ends. As we will see, Silliman is not willing to make any such admission.

The deployment of advertising language within poetry is not original with Silliman. In Zukofsky’s “A,” for example, one encounters a Wrigley’s ad: “A sign behind trees read (blood red as intertwined / Rose of the passion) / Wrigleys” (8). Likewise, Williams uses typographical nuances to reproduce ads for “Lee’s Lunch” and for “SODA” (spelled vertically and surrounded by asterisks) in his poems “Brilliant Sad Sun” and “The Attic Which Is Desire,” respectively (*CP* I, 269, 325). But Silliman’s interest in advertising language amounts to more than a reference to a gum manufacturer or lunch counter; in the context of *Tjanting*, the use of brand names facilitates investigation into the function of advertising within postmodern American culture. What is at stake, as Wright suggests, is the manipulation—the very ownership, in fact—of language: “The body was a garden. None of your words belong to you. The invariant plane of a characterization curve” (*Tjanting* 140). If by “your words” Silliman means the language itself (the structuralist “langue” that is opposed to individual instances of “parole,” or speech acts), then the statement is evidently true. The language as a whole does not belong to any one speaker or writer.
But what if our own individual speech acts carry the residue of someone else’s manipulation? One says to a visiting friend, for example, “I’m glad you came by today.” This is a simple, personal sentiment, a private speech act. Yet compare this statement to the following new sentences: “The psychology of glad wrap. Old dried flowers in a cup. Apron tied to the handle of the refrigerator door. Ward 4 planarians inch. Last night’s roast chicken still caked on the knife. Several types of one quark. ‘Glad’ is a registered trademark of Union Carbide Corporation” (Tjanting 79). Here marketing language has invaded the domestic sphere and has colonized the very word “glad.” Plastic wrap—a symptom of excess in its own right—is required to preserve leftover food, but in referring to it one uses the trade name: “glad wrap.” An adjective of affect becomes the handle for a product, and one truly is confronted with a manipulative “psychology.” Having noticed this effect, Silliman looks closer, and discovers that “‘Glad’ is a registered trademark” of an industrial manufacturer. The word literally no longer belongs to its quotidian user. Hence, when Silliman asks, “Is name a trade kleenex?” the question indicates more than a passing curiosity. (Fittingly—and depressingly—the spell check on my computer insists that “kleenex” must be spelled with a capital “k,” and the autocorrect function makes the change automatically.) To the extent that “kleenex” and “glad” are associated with products—to the extent that they belong to the realm of marketing—the very use of such terms commodifies speech. Perhaps “glad” can still be used as an adjective of affect without invoking plastic wrap, but the residue of past use remains. This commodification of language is, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, a major concern of both Berrigan and Antin as well. But while Berrigan attempts to reassert a connection to language through manipulation, and Antin tries to use the commodified language of the culture industry to new artistic ends, Silliman’s critique of commodified language begins with representation itself. By reproducing this language and calling attention to it, he invites the reader to rethink the extent to which the language of advertising shapes thought and communication.

At times, Silliman uses trade names as concrete details—as signifiers of the real—without encoding any direct critique or analysis: “We stand naked in the open doorway & watch the rain. A star on the shoe means it’s Converse. This is not some story” (122). Here the Converse logo simply exists as part of the urban landscape, which the poet has decoded correctly, without further comment. The deployment of such imagery within the poem gestures toward the larger question of whether it is possible to make reference (critical or otherwise) to a brand name without
simultaneously furthering a marketing campaign. In a pointed comparison between the commodification of poetry and tennis shoes, Silliman refers to his new Nikes: “One thing to write the work, another to hustle it. I stare at my new Nike running shoes, blue nylon with black waffle souls, full of secret, just-purchased pride. Days later, the after-effects of one sleepless night ebb” (188). The references to “souls” and “secret, just-purchased pride” imply a (potentially metaphysical) critique of commodity fetishism, but at the same time the primary piece of information conveyed by this sentence is that Ron Silliman wears Nikes. However critical Silliman’s stance toward the shoe company, his poem increases the exposure of the Nike brand name. Moreover, Silliman’s critiques tend to function at the nuanced level of Marxian discourse, whereas the language of brand names is anything but subtle. When Silliman notices that “7-Up & Coke logos adorn signs of small markets” (204), his use of the word “small” suggests a kind of colonization of family businesses by multinational corporations. On the one hand, he calls attention to this phenomenon; on the other, he engages in a kind of poetic product placement on behalf of these soda brands. So the question remains: Is it possible to use the language of advertising without turning the text into an advertisement? The question is especially pertinent to the field of postmodern poetics, since, as Marjorie Perloff points out in Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media, “the poet’s arena is the electronic world—the world of the Donahue Show and MTV, of People magazine and the National Enquirer, of Internet and MCI mail relayed around the world by modem” (xiii). The answer, I think, is a qualified “yes,” with the qualification being this: Branded language can indeed be effectively deployed within a politically progressive postmodern text, but it must be defamiliarized enough to jog the reader into considering it from a new perspective. Such defamiliarization is a function of form, and Silliman’s use of the new sentence creates precisely the level of textual disruption necessary for a radical critique of corporate language.

Silliman’s critical recontextualization of the McDonald’s brand name and logo demonstrates the critical possibilities inherent in Tjanting’s form. The poem’s constant rearrangement of syntax and context puts critical pressure on the name itself, and “McDonald’s” cannot simply recede into a realistic background, unexamined and unchallenged. Rather, it becomes a symptomatic example of late capitalist culture: “Questioning beggars. Under gold arches we gorged to heart’s delight. One’s seams seen” (20). “Questioning beggars” suggests both the urban poor asking for a handout from passersby and the interrogative
replies of those passersby (“Can you spare a quarter?” “What for?”). Yet this example of destitution is juxtaposed with a “we” that “gorged to heart’s delight” at McDonald’s, which is here represented by a logo rather than a name. The mediation of narrative has disappeared. There is no transition between those living in poverty and those gorging—between outside and inside. There is only the shock of a lack (economic, transitional, textual, etc.). As the McDonald’s reference undergoes syntactical distortion, and the syllogistic movement from sentence to sentence changes character, the critique of consumerism becomes more nuanced: “Shadows cast cause depth. Under heart’s arches we gorged to gold delight. Whispers in the next room” (28). The conspiratorial whispering reacts with the “gold delight” to call attention to an open secret—this fast food chain has become enormously successful by serving food that is relatively unhealthy. Moreover, fast food has substantially altered American culture. Corporations like McDonald’s change our fundamental relationship to our own bodies, to our habits and our inhabitation of the world: “Different hands for different glands. Handle of a small white plastic fork that ends in ‘golden’ arches. These are the metaphysics of morning” (52). The disposable fork tagged with a McDonald’s logo functions as a metonym for the increased alienation-effect produced by fast food. One eats poorly, and quickly, and away from home. The plastic fork is less a convenience than a representation of cultural hegemony, and this cultural hegemony extends even to one’s habits of perception: “Bag lunch in a plastic bag. Fast food means orange decor. Style is territorial” (61). Food becomes an extension of its physical surroundings, its architectural packaging. “Style is territorial” in that it represents a brand; colors such as orange and gold no longer belong to the spectrum but to the world of marketing. Ultimately, these colors characterize the food itself: “Orange food means fast decor” (148). All the elements of fast food function within a closed system, and each individual element metonymically invokes the others. Gold, orange, plastic, arches—these are no longer colors, material, and shape. They are portions of an advertising language. As Saussure, Barthes, and Claude Lévi-Strauss demonstrate over and over in their structuralist research, semiotic systems need not be made of words. Fast food is a signifying system, a language, and—to paraphrase Wright—one uses language or is used by it. In Tjanting, Stilliman suggests the latter while attempting the former. He attempts to use the language of marketing to suggest that we are being used by it. It is a difficult poetic maneuver, but one at which he is largely successful.
Silliman’s tactical redeployment of advertising language is at odds with Jameson’s account of the new sentence in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Jameson’s criticism of the new sentence form, which I briefly discussed in the last chapter, is worth reconsidering here, because Silliman’s use of what one might call reverse marketing would seem to invalidate Jameson’s (somewhat notorious) critique of Language writing. In *Postmodernism*, Jameson uses Perelman’s poem “China” to exemplify “so-called Language Poetry or the New Sentence,” which displays “schizophrenic fragmentation as [its] fundamental aesthetic” (28). With lines like “Run in front of your shadow. / A sister who points to the sky at least once a decade is a / good sister. / The landscape is motorized” (qtd. in Jameson 28), “China” is a fair enough example of the new sentence (though a prose poem would be more representative). However, Jameson’s classification of “China” as an example of “schizophrenic disjunction or écriture” (29) is somewhat troubling in that it would seem to deny the possibility that Language writing could mount any coherent political critique. For Jameson, textual schizophrenia is a fundamentally postmodern condition in which “the links of the signifying chain snap” and one is left with “a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers” (26). As a result, “the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (27). Clearly, such a series of entirely unrelated signifiers will not amount to a meaningful oppositional politics. But *Tjanting* does not fit Jameson’s definition of schizophrenic writing. Although Silliman does emphasize the material aspect of signifiers, he does not reduce them to purely disconnected, self-referential gestures. To the contrary, his critique of advertising as a semiotic system requires a precise awareness of the relations among signs. McDonald’s and its various logos function as both signifiers of a specific fast food chain and signifiers of late capitalism and its excesses. That is, Silliman wrenches these advertising signifiers out of their original semiotic system and works them into his own critique of this system. However complex such a redeployment may be, it hardly adds up to a schizophrenic “rubble.” Rather, Silliman’s repeated recontextualization of the semiotic system (its colors, shapes, logos, etc.) amounts to a specifically dialectical move—an attempt to integrate the limited semiotic system of advertising into the broader context of the society as a whole. Juxtaposing McDonald’s with references to poverty, excessive consumption, and waste is an instantiation of “the dialectical method,” which, according to Jameson, “allows a given phenomenon to be perceived as a moment or single interlocking
section in a single articulated process” (Form 312). Jameson argues that “[t]here is no content, for dialectical thought, but total content” (306), and it is within a “total content” that Tjanting situates the semiotics of advertising.

“...great rush before convulsive death.”

Advertising is not the only semiotic system used disruptively in Tjanting. Silliman is also interested in the textual representation of events that are inherently disruptive, and that may be made more so by their incorporation in the new sentence form. For example, his excessive candor regarding his own bodily functions is potentially surprising. Barrett Watten refers to “the sense of disturbance (or lack of decorum)” intrinsic to Tjanting, which is perhaps a slightly euphemistic way to approach Silliman’s detailed cataloguing of both his bowel movements and his sex life (Constructivist 106). Yet, after the moment of initial surprise (disgust?) when first confronted with “Cauliflower farts” (42) or “Flushing halfformed shit,” the reader (this one, at any rate) can reintegrate bodily functions into the larger textual structure. The same is not true of Silliman’s references to spectacular violence. Unexpected, extreme violence still has the capacity to shock, and the new sentence form contributes to this effect by preventing any larger narrative structure from absorbing such representations. Take, for example, the following depiction of a traffic accident:

Sight writing ceases down. At a loud thump I whirl around, to see a woman lying sprawled & crushed on Mission Street as a car speeds off. Never regardless of how much a red glass of wine you drink, wch empties. At first she’s still, lying in the gutter, then her body heaves convulsively & she begins shaking. Blue eye skies. Everyone on the bus rushd to the left side to see, then to the rear as it pulld away. (98)

Silliman’s own immediate shock registers at the level of syntax and vocabulary. A thump leads to a whirl leads to a horrifying scene. On the formal level, this shock makes itself felt by the very disruption of the (usually disruptive) new sentence pattern. The expected lack of syllogistic movement is itself lacking. One has come to expect Silliman’s new sentences to wander off in a nonnarrative progression, but in this case the sentences return twice to the scene of the accident. It is as though the violent shock
of the accident has jarred the new sentence form out of its discontinuity. Yet this lapse lasts only a moment before the march of sentences recommences. The woman’s traumatized body is left in the gutter, with the reader staring over the shoulders of the other passengers on the bus.

Trauma is more than an after-effect of spectacular violence; it is also a symptom of the real. In *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (1996), Hal Foster argues that the “shift in conception—from reality as an effect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma—may be definitive in contemporary art, let alone in contemporary theory, fiction and film” (146). Foster’s linkage of trauma to the real goes a long way toward expressing the effect of spectacular violence in *Tjanting*. The depiction of such violence functions in conjunction with the poem’s form to create an effect of shocking irruption followed by a return to normalcy. The ability to return to “normal” after such violence is perhaps more disturbing than the violence itself: “Gong shares out of touchd ploughs may be playd without being. Bob’s brain was blown out of his head, spattering the blue NBC minicam. Rapidly in the sky trail the jet diffuses” (*Tjanting* 139). Couched between two syntactically manipulated new sentences, the spectacle of a violent death exists as an unassimilated, traumatic rupture. Though the event may condition our understanding of the “sky trail” (a figurative representation of “Bob’s” dissipating breath), it is not absorbed by its context. To the extent that a camera is always a vehicle for the viewer (here the reader), the violence literally and horrifically distorts representation itself. The effect of the violence is all the more disturbing for the lack of prelude to the event, and the lack of interpretation afterward. Silliman makes no attempt to explain it or give it significance. It merely is. No realistic narrative contains the violence, and no conscious effort recuperates it into a larger moral or social framework. Like all acts of violence, this one remains meaningless at the most fundamental level.

Yet the inherent meaninglessness of violence does not prevent attempts to give it a symbolic value. As Michel Foucault has shown, spectacular violence can also be a tool of the state; it can represent the state’s attempt to inscribe a symbolic punishment on the body. Silliman draws attention to this symbolic register of violence in his presentation of an execution: “Coffee thru the filter filld the cup. Strapped in so tight he was unable to move his head, eyes sad & helpless before the black hood was lowerd, he nevertheless clenched his fists to the voltage so hard knuckles broke, ‘body wastes’ passing freely, until smoke rose from a singed leg, the skin on his hands starting to blacken, meeting the demands of the
state. Fast off to a start” (174). The pathos of the transition from a cup of coffee to a death in the electric chair is remarkable. To assimilate the physical details of this state-sanctioned killing to the humdrum facts of daily life is to render the execution itself humdrum—to normalize it. But Silliman does not offer any commentary that might integrate the fact of the execution within a larger ethical stance. Instead, he lets the violence stand alone as an instance of trauma. Each detail is purportedly explained by the last phrase, “the demands of the state.” But the fact that the state has mandated this act of deadly torture hardly explains anything. In fact, the violence is all the more inexplicable for the fact that it is legal. Appearing between a reference to coffee and a slightly scrambled allusion to (perhaps) one’s productivity in the morning (“Fast off to a start”), the execution scene serves as a reminder of the oppressive power structures that subdivide everyday life in America.25 The fact that the reader is able to go on reading might be said to illustrate the indifference of society as a whole. Though aware of such violence, one does not accord it any more attention than a cup of morning coffee. In fact, the reflections on the execution might be prompted by a story in the morning paper, in which case the spectacle of a state execution has become—if not entertainment—little more than information. (As Silliman puts it, “You are implicated, responsible, for anything you read” [155].) To the extent that news consumers become simultaneously consumers of spectacular violence, one might identify them (us) with another representation of death in Tjanting: “A man is shot dead for no reason under the bright overhead lights of Doggie Diner. A case of acid indigestion causes the cocaine smuggler’s balloons to burst in his stomach, great rush before convulsive death. The flag slaps about wildly in gusts of rain” (199). A pointless death followed by a “great rush,” accompanied by the wild waving of a flag—this is a disturbing representation of the American real, yet it is also a representation that is in keeping with contemporary experience. Realistic media reports paradoxically negate the real trauma of violence. To use Silliman’s words again, “The reality level of the news is zero” (118).

**Conclusion**

Much of this chapter on procedural form in Tjanting has dealt with the poem’s content. That form and content are inseparable is a truism of literary studies, and I will not belabor the point. In the case of Silliman’s formal procedure, the disruptive progression of sentences causes a
reevaluation of what is real, how it is perceived, and how it is most accurately represented. “My formalism marks a new content,” Silliman asserts, and he is correct. In and of itself, gritty urbanity is not difficult to find in the fiction, film, and even music of the late 1970s. Yet Silliman’s form prevents the assimilation of details to a larger narrative structure, and in so doing, it offers a stark representation (in fact, a re-presentation) of a society troubled by economic inequities, rampant consumerism, thinly concealed oppression, and violence. Remarkably, *Tjanting* achieves this depiction of postindustrial American society not through stories or vignettes, but through sentences. And while these sentences always tend toward narrative, they simultaneously resist it. They remain at the level of raw material—the raw material of a writing process that refuses to recede into the background, a labor process that refuses to disappear into commodity fetishism. The sentences that make up *Tjanting* remain largely at an unintegrated level, with each sentence remaining an individual, serial part of the whole poem. Bernstein mentions “the reversibility of macrostructure and microstructure” in Silliman’s poetry, and this reversibility is abundantly evident in *Tjanting* (Dream 313). Words constitute sentences. Sentences constitute paragraphs. Paragraphs constitute the poem. And the poem—page by page, graph by graph, scrawl by scrawl—is composed of words. The whole comprises not just a sequence of signs but an accumulation of labor, and page after page Silliman calls attention to this fact. The book does not close; it stops. It reaches the completion of a procedure, the conclusion of labor. The poem ends in open-endedness, back where it began: “What then?” (204). The question self-reflexively refers to the form: When does this procedure end? But it also issues a political challenge to the reader. *Here is the world as I see it*, Silliman suggests. What will we do about it?
CHAPTER 5

Objectivist Form and Feminist Materialism in Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, social values are necessarily encoded in the form of a literary work. Literary form is, ultimately, a structure that displays the results of literary labor, and labor occurs within a social totality. One always works within a given social setting, regardless of the type of work one does. Some literary forms work to reveal labor, and some to conceal it. A polished sonnet may appear effortless, even if it took dozens of revisions to achieve. On the other hand, the procedural forms that we have examined in the preceding chapters tend to lay bare the labor involved, and concomitantly to reflect working conditions in a postindustrial society. Moreover, as we have seen, procedural forms need not be produced by politically engaged poets to register a social critique. An ideologically uncommitted poet like Ted Berrigan, a leftist like David Antin, and a Marxist like Ron Silliman can all produce work that encodes the labor process, and it is up to the critic to place this labor within a larger social and historical framework. In this final chapter, we will encounter a variation on the political continuum: a poet who is informed by a Marxian critique of commodity fetishism, but who also attempts to think beyond the language of production and consumption. Lyn Hejinian’s use of procedural form in *My Life* highlights the arbitrary, repetitive nature of postindustrial labor, and her treatment of commodities highlights the reification of labor. Yet, as we will see, Hejinian’s understanding of the world is open-ended and exploratory—perhaps even utopian—and it will not be contained within...
a strictly Marxian framework. Her focus on objects and events as they exist within domestic space can be read as a feminist revision of Silliman’s Marxian discourse, especially given that Marxist theory has traditionally failed to account for women’s lives and labor outside the marketplace. At the same time, this feminist revision and expansion of Marxian discourse does not amount to a repudiation. Hejinian’s ideological position is perhaps best described as post-Marxist, in that it is informed by—but not restricted to—a Marxist understanding of labor.

Within a study of form in postmodern American poetry, Hejinian’s *My Life* presents a unique challenge. Although the poem develops along clearly defined procedural lines, the constraints of the procedural form tell us little about how the poem actually works. In the 1980 first edition, *My Life* contains thirty-seven sections of thirty-seven sentences each, in keeping with Hejinian’s thirty-seven years of age at the time of composition. The 1987 version, which I discuss here, features forty-five sections of forty-five sentences each, in accordance with Hejinian’s age at the time of revision. Hejinian has also composed a supplementary work, *My Life in the Nineties* (2003), containing ten sections of sixty sentences each, bringing the life-poem up-to-date through Hejinian’s sixtieth year. But despite the autobiographical bent of Hejinian’s quantitative constraint, *My Life*, as Marjorie Perloff points out, challenges the “mode” of popular autobiography and its “transparent” language, which typically serves “to convey facts, detail events, and produce, here and there, rhetorical flourishes that demand our attention” (*Artifice* 169). Rather, as Larry McCaffery explains, “Hejinian takes the banal genre of autobiography and the equally banal outlines of a mid-century, middle-class life...and passes them through the filter of an alienating form” (122–123). We have, then, an interesting formal problem: a procedural poem that foregrounds the autobiographical origins of its constraints even as it subverts the conventions of autobiography.

If the form does not contain autobiography, in any generic sense of the word, then what does it contain? Or, to think in terms of formal *procedure* rather than containment, if the form does not produce a traditional autobiography, what does it produce? In this chapter, I will suggest that, first and foremost, the form of *My Life* produces objects. Hejinian’s procedure is essentially one of objectification—the objectification of both language and matter. The poem reveals a remarkable attention to discrete objects and their relation to the poet’s everyday life. Objects, commodities, and metonyms function as raw material to be isolated and explored within this experimental autobiography. At the same
time, the pervasive repetition of discrete phrases in *My Life* serves to objectify language. Across the forty-five sections of the poem, various phrases and sentences appear and reappear either without change or with only minor changes. The extensive repetition of these syntactical units leads to strings of words functioning as linguistic objects in their own right. The objectifying and object-oriented bent of Hejinian’s procedure has a clear antecedent in the Objectivist poetics of Louis Zukofsky, and it also invites comparison to a more general modernist fascination with the function of objects and commodities in modern life. Thus, in discussing Hejinian’s use of what I will call Objectivist form, I will also consider her postmodern revision of a modernist obsession with objects, and the ways in which *My Life* presses us beyond a simplistic, binary understanding of objects as either pure materiality or straightforward commodities. As we will see, the poem calls attention to the impact of commodities on postmodern culture, but it also displays a fascination with the role of objects in everyday life, beyond issues of reification and exchange value.

**Hejinian’s Objectivist Poetics**

Hejinian began her writing career among the San Francisco Language poets in the 1970s, the same avant-garde milieu in which Silliman developed his Marxian poetics. As we have already seen in Silliman’s work, Language poetry—particularly as it developed in San Francisco—was influenced by the Objectivist poetics of the first half of the century. In her essay “Barbarism” (1995), Hejinian points to the stylistic affinities among Objectivist and Language poets, noting that the “the notorious ‘difficulty,’ ‘obscurity,’ ‘opacity,’ or ‘impenetrability’ that is sometimes ascribed to Language and post-Language writing” is also ascribed to “the modernist writing that it follows, that of Gertrude Stein and the Objectivists in particular” (*Language* 330). Hejinian’s critical writing on the Objectivists has been more sparing than her extensive treatment of Stein, yet the influence of Objectivism on Hejinian’s poetics is very much in evidence. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain argue, Hejinian, like Silliman, one of a number of contemporary poets who further an Objectivist poetics of “attention to the materiality of both the world and the word” (3). Charles Altieri, who also notes the Objectivist tendencies in Hejinian’s poetry, specifically links her work to “Objectivist ideals of sincerity” as opposed to “the Objectivist insistence on the poem as material object,” which he finds in the poetry of Silliman, among other Language poets (302). I would argue that the
dichotomy between sincerity and objectification is somewhat exaggerated here, and that Hejinian’s procedural form in *My Life*—like Silliman’s in *Tjanting*—does in fact contribute to a sense of “the poem as material object.” Nevertheless, the connection Altieri draws between Hejinian and a poetics of sincerity is useful and calls for further examination.

Objectivist sincerity is something quite different from the notion of honesty or genuineness that one normally associates with the word. In the 1931 essay “Sincerity and Objectification,” which first appeared in the special Objectivist issue of Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry* magazine, Zukofsky describes his concept of sincerity as a way of thinking about—and through—words and objects: “In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody” (*Prepositions* 194). Zukofsky’s dense, abstract prose tends to be resistant to interpretation, but three primary features of Objectivist sincerity can be deduced from this passage: (1) If writing is sincere, the arrangement of words on the page should fill some structural necessity within the poem. In other words, the Objectivist line is never really a free-verse line, even if it does not follow a regular metrical pattern. The poem will always have some internal, formal logic. (2) Sincere writing is melodic, in the metaphorical sense; it is pleasing or interesting to the ear. (3) Most importantly in relation to Hejinian’s poetry, sincere writing involves minute attention to things. In fact, the emphasis on “things as they exist” is so great that it becomes all-absorbing within the sincere poem. Things become the material of which the poem is made, and thus it is things, not words, which are to be directed “along a line of melody.” Or, more accurately, one might say that these “melodic” things of which the poem is made are words, and thus words achieve the status of things within sincere writing. To return to DuPlessis and Quartermain’s language, which I quoted in the last chapter, “the term ‘Objectivist’ has come to mean, a non-symbolist, post-imagist poetics, characterized by a historical, realist, antimythological worldview, one in which ‘the detail, not mirage’ calls attention to the materiality of both the world and the word” (3). In short, sincere writing is formalist, melodic, and reified. Moreover, the overall effect of sincerity is the objectification of the poem as a whole:

Presented with sincerity, the mind even tends to supply, in further suggestion which does not attain rested totality, the totality not
always found in sincerity and necessary only for perfect rest, complete appreciation. This rested totality may be called objectification—the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object. (Zukofsky 194)

To the extent that the poem is sincerely written, it will function as an object in its own right. It will both depict objects and be an object at the same time.

In “Barbarism,” Hejinian adopts the Objectivist concept of sincerity to explain the function of poetic difficulty. In her use of the term, Zukofsky’s insistence on melody appears to be irrelevant, and his emphasis on an objectified form gives way to the more open-ended conception of “a forming.” However, Zukofsky’s equation of words and things still informs Hejinian’s use of the term sincerity:

Difficulty and its corollary effects may produce work that is not about the world but is in it. The difficulty of the work, then, does not constitute an intransigence; on the contrary, it is the material manifestation of the work’s mutability, its openness, not just a form but, more importantly, a forming, a manifestation of what the Objectivists would have termed its “sincerity”—the ethical principle by which the poet tests words against the actuality of the world, the articulation of our status as presences in common (and only in common) with other presences in the world. (Inquiry 331)

If a poem “is not about the world but is in it”; if one can speak of poetic difficulty as a “material manifestation”; if words can be tested “against the actuality of the world,” then sincerity, as Hejinian uses it, retains its Objectivist—and objectifying—sense. It indicates not only an “ethical principle” but also a conception of words as things, as objects among other objects. Materiality becomes a feature “of both the world and the word” (DuPlessis and Quartermain 3). In My Life, Hejinian employs the term “sincerity” in its Objectivist sense, yet she also interrogates and expands this specialized sense. She “tests” the word, to use her own words. In the nineteenth section of My Life, she writes, “It was at this time, I think, that I became interested in science. Is that a basis for descriptive sincerity. I am a shard, signifying isolation—here I am thinking aloud of my affinity for the separate fragment taken under scrutiny” (71). Science—a mode of relating to the world through objective facts rather
than affect—leads into this reference to “descriptive sincerity,” a key word pairing. Descriptive sincerity is essentially a form of Objectivist sincerity; it suggests a way of emphasizing the materiality of things in the world. Descriptive sincerity implies a way of relating to “the separate fragment taken under scrutiny,” not just as a fragment of some larger problem, but also in its separateness, as a detail of importance in its own right.

In the forty-first section of the poem, sincerity appears again, this time associated with both emotion and description:

At this time, perpetual poetry, hence poetry without dread, and there were many poets ranting sympathetically, while I could not help, nor would I, but have maternal passions, knotting the materials of sincerity. I quoted Zola: “We are experimental moralists showing by experiment in what fashion a passion behaves in a social milieu.” (145)

As Perloff has pointed out, the sections of My Life do not always correspond directly to a year in the poet’s life, although “in the course of the narrative, the references gradually shift from childhood to adolescence to adult thought and behavior” (Artifice 162). The forty-first section loosely corresponds to a moment of artistic maturity, when poetry comes “without dread,” and when the frustration of younger writers searching for subject matter produces “maternal passions.” These passions are associated with a materiality, a physicality that makes them objects of exploration. The reference to French novelist Émile Zola is particularly significant here. French realist novels of the nineteenth century, like Zola’s Au Bonheur des dames (The Ladies’ Paradise [1883]), for example, involve an exhaustive exploration of a social milieu in all its material details. Realism involves both a profuse cataloguing of objects and a treatment of affects as objectifiable, as open to experimentation and exploration. For Hejinian, the Objectivist focus on “thinking with the things as they exist” can be expanded to include passions as well, and these in turn can be the objects of sincere description. Sincerity retains its Objectivist rigor even as it expands to include emotional experiences that were of minor interest to Zukofsky in 1931 (his later emphasis on the concept of love and his shift from a Marxian to a Spinozan philosophical stance are another matter).5

Sincerity is not the only concept that links Hejinian’s work to Objectivist poetics. Her interest in the concept of particularity—the distinctness of individual objects in the world—also resonates with Zukofsky’s original
theorization of the Objectivist movement. In “Program: ‘Objectivists’ 1931,” Zukofsky defines Objectivist poetry through a reference to particularity: “An Objective: (Optics)—The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus. (Military use)—That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry)—Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars” (Prepositions 189). This last, poetic definition of an objective contains two separate elements. The “Desire for what is objectively perfect” suggests a commitment to formal perfection above and beyond the realm of merely subjective taste or preference, while the latter half of the phrase suggests a certain type of content. The Objectivist poem will concern itself with subject matter derived from “historic and contemporary particulars.” Zukofsky continues,

It is understood that historic and contemporary particulars may mean a thing or things as well as an event or a chain of events: i.e., an Egyptian pulled-glass bottle in the shape of a fish or oak leaves, as well as the performance of Bach’s *Matthew Passion* in Leipzig, or the Russian revolution and the rise of metallurgical plants in Siberia. (189)

For Zukofsky, then, “particulars” are specific objects or occurrences that can be concretely described, and his own poetry is full of such particulars. In the first stanza of “Train-Signal” from *55 Poems* (1923–1935), for example, Zukofsky relies on a series of objects to describe the effect of movement: “With stars past troughs to sound / —thru thick twilight / —by the stumps of the trees / blasts near the faces of leaves / by a hair’s breadth separated” (*CSP* 42). The pervasiveness of discrete objects is striking. Rather than the train signal of the title, one encounters “stars,” “troughs,” “stumps,” “trees,” and “leaves”—all objects associated with a train traveling through a wood at night. Perhaps it is the blaring train signal that moves “With stars past troughs to sound,” and this description gives even the signal an objectified quality, as though one might watch it traveling beside the train. Verbs, too, are objectified through their syntactical ambiguity. The train and its signal may move “With stars past troughs to sound”—that is, for the purpose of sounding. But they may also move toward “sound,” in which case the word “sound” must be taken as a noun. A similar ambiguity surrounds “blasts,” which may be read as either verb or noun, but tends toward a kind of object status because of the surrounding syntactical pressure of “stars,” “stumps,” “faces,” and so on. One wants to read it as one
more noun in a series of nouns, although the stanza would then lack its most likely verb. Even the “twilight”—usually an indicator of time and shade rather than substance—has become “thick,” while the “hair’s breadth”—the measure of a distance—weirdly echoes the idea of a hare’s breath. The parade of particulars continues in the second stanza: “[W]ith but a proof to the leaves’ / closeness: leaf over leaf’s face / with a hair: and the cheek kissed / with the shredded space” (CSP 42). The density of leaves is invoked by repetition: “leaves’ closeness,” “leaf,” and “leaf’s face.” Even “space,” a fundamental intangibility, has taken on a particular existence, “shredded” by objects. Such particularities abound in Zukofsky’s short poetry, as do references to more historical figures, events, ideologies, and places: “V.I. Ulianov” (CSP 21), “the Passaic Strike of 1926” (26), “Aged Bomb Throwers” of the Soviet Union (46), “Naziism” (54), “THE AMERICAN BANKNOTE FACTORY” in 1933 (56), and so on.

Hejinian’s understanding of particularity is similarly predicated upon the treatment of individual objects, but her interest in these objects is less inclined toward a formalist perfectionism or a historical specificity. For Hejinian, attention to the particularity of things is exploratory. In her essay “Strangeness” (1988), she outlines a theory of poetry as exploration. Ultimately, attention to the particularity of objects is part of what she calls a “poetics of description,” though this poetics does not entail “after-the-fact realism, with its emphasis on the world described (the objects of description)” or excessive “focus on an organizing subjectivity (that of the perceiver-descraper)” (Inquiry 138). Rather, for Hejinian, “description” functions “as a method of invention and of composition” which “is phenomenal rather than epiphenomenal, original, with a marked tendency toward effecting isolation and displacement, that is toward objectifying all that’s described and making it strange” (138). In Objectivist terms, the two key concepts here are “isolation”—an opportunity to appreciate an object in all its particularity—and objectification, “objectifying all that’s described and making it strange.” Though Zukofsky does not explicitly incorporate the concept of defamiliarization into his Objectivist poetics, it is always a factor in the objectification of particulars. To examine an object in its particular materiality is a fundamentally estranging act. Objectification and estrangement are part of the same process, the latter term describing the affect of the “perceiver-descraper” and the former the state of the object or event. For Hejinian, one way to achieve this objectification / estrangement is to apply paratactic modes of description in writing. Paratactic composition provides a methodological
link to the scientific writing of explorers, whose texts serve as a model for a poetics of description:

Parataxis is significant both of the way information is gathered by explorers and the way things seem to accumulate in nature. Composition by juxtaposition presents observed phenomena without merging them, preserving their discrete particularity while attempting also to represent the matrix of their proximities. (Hejinian, *Inquiry* 155)

Preserving the “discrete particularity” of objects is essential to a poetics of description, as it is to Objectivist poetics in general. The opposite of a descriptive, object-oriented poetics would thus be a poetics of “merging,” wherein the particularity of discrete details disappears in a consuming, subordinating text. Parataxis exists in opposition to hypotaxis. The hypotactic text would subordinate objects to larger issues such as narrative, character development, affect, ideology, psychology, or some other nonobjective schema.6 That is, it would subordinate certain objects for the purpose of describing others, a process that occurs in metaphor. And as soon as objects start to function as elements of a poetic comparison rather than as particulars in their own right, one has moved away from an Objectivist poetics of description: “Description may narrate nature but it does so principally by exhibiting its particulars. To the extent that metaphors can be said to give things names which properly belong to other things, they were held to be inconsistent with a respect for particularity” (157). “Ultimately,” she argues, “conditions are incomprehensible without the use of conceptual structures, but an initial, essential recognition of difference—of strangeness—develops only with attention to single objects, while others are held in abeyance” (157). For examples of a poetics of description, Hejinian looks not to the romantics but to their nineteenth-century contemporaries, explorers like Meriwether Lewis and William Clark or Charles Darwin (140). Such explorers undertake a “nonmetaphoric examination of particulars” that functions as “a significant aesthetic element in their writings”; they attempt “to discover the tangibility and singular distinctness of the world’s exuberant details and individualities without spiriting them away from each other” (157–158). This recognition of “tangibility and singular distinctness” operates on the same principle as Zukofsky’s attention to “historic and contemporary particulars.” Both
Objectivist poetics and a poetics of description take attention to particularity as an indispensable point of departure.

Although both the first and second editions of My Life were published before the writing of “Strangeness,” Hejinian’s poetics of descriptive particularity is very much in evidence in her life poem. “The day will twinkle, sparkle, shoot forth its single bits,” she writes in the eighth section, and these “single bits” will become the objects of description, the particulars with which—and through which—the poet will construct her life (ML 31). In the ninth section, description finds its object in the form of a very singular tree: “It didn’t seem the least bit amazing that they had tunneled the highway through the living redwood tree, for in so doing they had changed the tree into the tunnel, made it something it had not been before, and separated it forever from any other tree. The universal is animated by individuality” (37). The tree becomes an object of description not because it is representative of an average tree, but precisely because it is not. Such attention to particularity amounts, par excellence, to an Objectivist praxis.7

**Procedural Form, or, How to Generate Formal Objects**

Objectivism provides a model for approaching content, and it also provides a means of thinking about form. For Zukofsky, Objectivist form entails the achievement of “completed sound or structure,” of “perfect rest,” of “the art form as an object” and of the “objectively perfect” work. This emphasis on formal stability is somewhat at odds with Hejinian’s sense of form as fundamentally active and generative. In her essay “The Rejection of Closure” (1983), Hejinian asks, “Can form make the primary chaos (the raw material, the unorganized impulse and information, the uncertainty, the incompleteness, vastness) articulate without depriving it of its capacious vitality, its generative power?” (Inquiry 47). The question suggests a sense of form as productive force rather than means of containment, a sense of form that we have already seen operating in the work of Berrigan, Antin, and Silliman. Form articulates without ordering, Hejinian suggests, and generates without stifling.8 “Can form go even further than that,” Hejinian continues, “and actually generate that potency, opening uncertainty to curiosity, incompleteness to speculation, and turning vastness into plenitude?” (47). Can form, in other words, be a generative force in its own right, directing but not containing the “capacious vitality” of the “primary chaos”? For Hejinian, “the answer is yes; that is, in fact, the function of form in art. Form is not a fixture but an activity” (47). Hejinian’s sense
of form as an active, generative power—a way of working, to use Antin’s phrase—places her at a remove from Zukofsky’s desire for formal stasis, as does her insistence that, for Language writers, “a poem is not an isolated autonomous rarified aesthetic object” (323–324). At the same time, her sense of form as generative is very much in keeping with the postmodern procedural forms we have seen in preceding chapters, and with Joseph Conte’s definition of procedural poetry:

A procedural form is “closed” by virtue of its entirely predetermined structure, but the function of that structure is radically different from that of traditional closed forms. A traditional form is imposed on an already known content in an effort to contain and shape it as an object of art; it is a product of a hierarchical cosmos in which all things can be known and situated accordingly. The procedural form is a generative structure that constrains the poet to encounter and examine that which he or she does not immediately fathom, the uncertainties and incomprehensibilities of an expanding universe in which there can be no singular impositions. (Conte 15–16)

As Conte’s quotation marks indicate, postmodern procedural form may be “closed,” but it also involves Hejinian’s desired “rejection of closure.” Procedural form structures “uncertainties and incomprehensibilities” into itself, and in doing so it constrains but does not contain. Paradoxically, the “closed” quality of a procedural form requires of the poet an encounter with the open, “expanding universe.” Moreover, the “entirely predetermined structure” of a procedural form militates against metaphysical exaggeration or self-indulgence. The postmodern procedural poem is precisely not a vehicle for inspiration, but a means to structure literary labor:

An invented form allows one to begin anywhere—the form says begin now and then the form says stop now. You’re always already writing, and it’s always already going on when you stop and you’re not making any particular claims on that particular moment as being divine or a moment of transmission or anything. (Hejinian, “Local” 140)

As in Silliman’s *Tjanting*, each moment—each unit of language—contained by the form is there because of the exigencies of the procedure, not because of any particular poetic inspiration. The “37 × 37 (or
45 × 45) square” of My Life is thus not a metaphysical, numerological, or symbolic necessity, but an arbitrary determinant of the duration of writing (Perloff, Artifice 164). The arbitrary nature of this procedure highlights the artificial, constructed quality of the formal object: “My life is as permeable constructedness” (ML 133). Or, as Hejinian explains, “what I was really trying to do with the form of My Life is emphasize that what you have here is a made life—a written one, but a made one” (“Local” 136). This emphasis on constructedness brings us back once again to Zukofsky’s “art form as an object.” Construction and objectification are two sides of the same coin; both entail a fundamental interest in the materiality of language and of the poem as a whole. While Hejinian’s understanding of form is more dynamic than Zukofsky’s, both exhibit fidelity to the constructedness of the made object.

The 45 × 45 numerical constraint of My Life defines the boundaries of the poem’s formal construction, but it does not account for the objectification of language that takes place within these boundaries. In My Life, textual objectification is primarily a result of an extended repetition of sentences and sentence fragments. “To some extent,” Hejinian writes, “each sentence has to be the whole story,” yet individual sentences are not isolated occurrences in My Life (ML 93). Rather, they are objectifiable, repeatable syntactic units that can function as what both Perloff and Craig Dworkin have referred to as leitmotifs. Using language from My Life to emphasize his point, Dworkin notes that repetition and defamiliarization are closely related processes: “The text, in the Russian formalist tradition of ‘making it strange,’ repeats a word or phrase over and over again to disintegrate its associations, to defamiliarize it” (“Penelope” 71). Both of these processes—repetition and defamiliarization—are part of a larger process of objectification. As individual flows of language become ossified or congealed into maneuverable units, they take on an object status. This objectification of syntactic units allows for a closer examination of thought. For Hejinian, thinking is a Wittgensteinian process of arranging language, and so the exploration of thought will inevitably entail an exploration of the language units that compose thinking. In My Life, Hejinian explains, “I was trying to follow out and emphasize the ways in which structures of thinking echo structures of language and then reconstruct them. And I wanted to detail the inverse situation: the ways in which language echoes and constructs thinking” (Inquiry 166). To examine a phrase or sentence is to examine a thought. “A person does rethink constantly,” Hejinian notes, “while at the same time the context for doing so is always changing. Certain ‘facts’ (words or phrases)
in a fixed vocabulary may be reiterated, but their practical effects and metaphysical implications differ from day to day, situation to situation” (Inquiry 167). The objectification of the sentence, then, enables the exploration of thought. A “fixed vocabulary” represents a fixed system of thinking, but to the extent that the context of the vocabulary is never stable, thinking itself will never be static: “There is, as Gertrude Stein pointed out, repetition but not sameness” (Inquiry 167). Repetition of a given sentence-object is both generated and limited by the procedure, which can be closed off but cannot achieve closure.

A number of sentences from My Life might be used to exemplify this process of syntactic objectification (“As for we who ‘love to be astonished’ ” [10]; “It is hard to turn away from moving water” [44]; “Such displacements alter illusions, which is all-to-the-good” [71]; “We are not forgetting the patience of the mad, their love of detail” [77]; etc.). I will focus on one of them: “A pause, a rose, something on paper” (7), which appears for the first time on the first page of My Life, in the upper-left corner, in italics. Each of the forty-five sections of the poem begins with a phrase or sentence fragment in the blank space of the upper left corner, but the purpose of these introductory phrases is somewhat ambiguous. Georgia Johnston calls the introductory motifs “tag lines” and argues that they invite readers to become part of the construction of memory within Hejinian’s poetic autobiography:

In this performance text of repetitions, the tag lines enact a kind of remembering different from a present “I” remembering a past, and this other kind of remembering makes for an alternative narratology of autobiography. Instead of an “I” remembering a scene from a past, readers remember these phrases as they repeat. (46–47)

Hank Lazer, on the other hand, finds that the introductory motifs highlight linguistic materiality:

Each section of My Life begins with a floating (upper-lefthand corner) superscription or caption written in italics. This caption, another means of emphasizing the materiality of the signifier, causes us to ask: What do I do with this italicized phrase? What is its relationship to the body of the text? Is it a title, an abstract, a commentary, a distillation, a decoration? (vol. 2, 32)
The ambiguity Lazer alludes to is probably irresolvable, but there is no doubt that the emphasis placed on these phrases by their isolation on the page conditions the subsequent reading of each section. One searches for a relationship between “superscription” and text, and perhaps the search itself is the point: The gap between the superscriptions and the subsequent sections invites active, interrogative reading. In any case, the appearance of “A pause, a rose, something on paper” in the upper-left corner of the first page makes it both the opening of the first section and the opening of the poem as a whole. Hejinian has noted that the phrase has its origin in Marcel Proust’s A la recherche du temps perdu. She explains that the phrase “was (metonymically) translated” from “a description of an approach to Combray, which the narrator sees emerging from the distance, bit by bit suffused with what he knows: the plain, the spire, a radiance anticipating the color of the streets” (Inquiry 185). Like My Life, Proust’s magnum opus constantly foregrounds the relationship between objects and memory (one thinks, for example, of the memories triggered by Proust’s “morceau de madeleine” dipped in a cup of tea [145]), and so the connection is hardly random.

Yet knowing the Proustian origin of “A pause, a rose, something on paper” does not really help us understand Hejinian’s use of the phrase within her poem. This series of nouns makes for a rather odd opening, in that it suggests a parallelism that is not actually present. One expects that the three nouns will equal three things, but a “pause” disrupts this reading, in that a pause is not an object at all but a duration. Perhaps, it alludes to some mental or physical act that precedes the perception of the subsequent objects. One pauses, and then one sees “a rose” and “something on paper.” Or perhaps a pause is a sort of meta-imperative; one must pause in order to read “a pause,” and then the object content arrives. Whatever the case may be, the appearance of this sequence on the first page marks the first and the last time that one will be able to consider it in isolation. Here the sentence-object exists in a box, separate from the rest of the text. But as the poem progresses, the objectified text will take on a series of new contexts. In the third section, the fragment finds its way into “a nature scrapbook”: “Flip over small stones, dried mud. We thought that the mica might be gold. A pause, a rose, something on paper, in a nature scrapbook” (ML 16). The phrase has become a catalogue of the contents of the scrapbook, and—to the extent that one might read a “pause” as a blank space—it fits quite logically in this context. In the next two sentences, the idea of contents—of items collected—comes to signify the process of memory: “What follows a strict chronology has no
memory. For me, they must exist, the contents of that absent reality, the objects and occasions which now I reconsidered” (16). The contents of the nature scrapbook are thus also “the contents of that absent reality,” which is one’s past. Memory is textual, “something on paper”; it consists of objects, textual and otherwise.

In the fifth section, the phrase becomes a sentence in its own right: “You could tell that it was improvisational because at that point they closed their eyes. A pause, a rose, something on paper. Solitude was the essential companion” (ML 20). Here the objectified text seems to become the object of contemplation. An unidentified “they” close their eyes, and this act of concentration leads into the familiar phrase. This meditative mood continues in sections seven and nine, where the poet asserts, respectively, “There is so little public beauty. I found myself dependent on a pause, a rose, something on paper” and “I have been spoiled with privacy, permitted the luxury of solitude. A pause, a rose, something on paper” (28, 41).

In the twelfth section, the phrase appears in a more problematic context. It becomes quite difficult to assimilate it to the larger semantic structure of the surrounding sentences: “I was more terrified of the FBI agents than of the unspecified man who had kidnapped, murdered, and buried the girl in the other fifth grade in the hill behind school. A pause, a rose, something on paper. It was at about this time that my father provided me with every right phrase about the beauty and wonder of books” (48–49).

Between two representations of masculinity—one violent and terrifying, the other sentimental and kind—“A pause, a rose, something on paper” seems particularly out of place. The phrase can be read as a signifier of emotional pause or calm, given its previous contexts, but this is a tenuous reading at best. In this instance, the fragment remains indeterminate.

By my count, the phrase “a pause, a rose, something on paper” turns up thirteen more times in My Life, for a total of nineteen appearances. Sometimes, with a bit of hermeneutic reaching, one can integrate the phrase into a larger structure of meaning. In the sixteenth section, for example, the “pause” and “something on paper” may be read literally: “When you open a letter do you hope for a check. A pause, a rose, something on paper” (61). Perhaps the future poet has received a check in the mail for her birthday. She has paused and found something on paper. But the following sentence, “Duck eggs taste ‘eggier’” (62), is so far removed from the previous two that it calls into question any larger attempt to connect one sentence with the next. On several occasions, the phrase clearly gestures toward a larger conceptual framework, and I will examine two of these instances here. In both instances, the phrase exists as
part of a larger syntactical unit that comments on the construction of the poem as a whole. The first, in the fourteenth section, reads simply, “A pause, a rose, something on paper implicit in the fragmentary text” (55). To be “implicit” is to be folded inward, to be contained within, to require explication. There is certainly “something on paper” (meaning itself) that is “implicit” in the poem as a whole. The phrase is practically an invitation to read more closely, to become more active in unfolding the meaning of My Life. The phrase “A pause, a rose, something on paper” is also “implicit in the fragmentary text” in the sense that it functions as a textual representation of memory, an unfolding of past thought in the present. Memory is always in evidence in My Life, just as this phrase is always recurring, bringing previous textual associations with it. One might even argue that, at the formal level, each paratactic sentence implies (or metonymically invokes) all the others. To use Hejinian’s language again, “To some extent, each sentence has to be the whole story” (ML 93). But the key emphasis in the above phrase falls on the last words, the “fragmentary text.” The term is a terse but accurate description of My Life in its entirety. The poem is fragmentary not because it is incomplete (what poem is not?) but because it is composed of fragments. It is composed quite often of sentence fragments, but also, it is composed of fragmentary glimpses of the poet’s world. In the second metatextual usage of the phrase, one finds paratactic composition itself theorized: “A pause, a rose, something on paper—an example of parascription” (88). This neologism could be read as a conflation of two discrete terms, “parataxis” and “inscription,” in which case “parascription” would reference the syntax of the poem itself—a form of para-tactic in-scription, which is to say paratactic writing. More literally, though, parascription is writing beside, and the phrase “A pause, a rose, something on paper” first appears as a caption in its own textual space beside the first block of text. Thus, the sentence is entirely self-referential: “A pause, a rose, something on paper” is “an example of parascription.”

As the permutations of “A pause, a rose, something on paper” make clear, meaning in My Life is created interstitially, in the spaces between the sentences. Writing of the “new sentence” form employed by many of the poets associated with the San Francisco Language group, Silliman notes, “The new sentence is a decidedly contextual object. Its effects occur as much between, as within, sentences” (NS 92). Although Hejinian’s repetition is somewhat different from Silliman’s employment of the new sentence, the interstitial effect is very much in evidence in Hejinian’s work. Similar to Silliman’s new sentence, Hejinian’s sentences function as an
arrangement of “contextual objects,” and these sentence-objects inevitably take on new variations of meaning each time they are redeployed. In Stein’s language, “It is impossible to avoid meaning” (HTW 71). Ultimately, the recurrence of “A pause, a rose, something on paper” (or any of the other recurrent phrases in the text) contributes to textual objectification in multiple ways. First, there is the objectification of individual phrases, or sentence-objects, as I have been calling them. The mobility of these syntactic units lends them an objective existence as discrete pieces of textual raw material. Too unique to be clichés and too fabricated to be mere variations on a theme, these sentence-objects are precisely a form of “writing (audibility in two-dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such” (Zukofsky, Prepositions 194). And as we have seen, such writing is fundamentally estranging, in that the process of objectification changes text into something alien to its author: “Language becomes so objectified that it is different from whatever you know or say” (ML 141). At the same time, these defamiliarized sentence-objects function as fragments of a larger textual object—the poem as a whole.

* * *

Having examined Hejinian’s formal procedure within an Objectivist framework, I will spend the second half of this chapter discussing objects in their own right. My Life is not only a poem influenced by Objectivist poetics; it is also a poem that is full of objects—full of references to them, representations of them, and thoughts and memories associated with them. At times, My Life displays a modernist fascination with pure material things, but this fascination is tempered by a deep awareness of the process of reification, in which objects substitute themselves for social relations and obscure class exploitation. Thus, in examining the representation of objects in My Life, I will begin with a Marxian analysis of commodities, and then move on to a consideration of material objects as they exist outside the marketplace. As we will see, Hejinian’s treatment of objects in My Life is consonant with an expansive, feminist notion of materiality that cannot be fully explained by the orthodox Marxist theory of the commodity form.

Commodities

Many quotidian objects are also commodities, and as such, they are implicated in a larger system of exchange. In a capitalist society, the
reification of labor and social relationships that occurs as a result of the production and exchange of commodities is central to the experience of everyday life. Georg Lukács emphasizes this fact in his *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), where he suggests that “the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects” (83). From a Marxist perspective, the commodity form is problematic because it disguises human interactions. “The essence of commodity-structure,” for Lukács, as for Marx, “is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity’, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (83). This formulation of the “essence of commodity-structure” serves as a useful summary of the process of reification itself. In Marxian terms, reification is the process whereby people’s social relationships are literally turned into things, into commodities. Because the “phenomenon of reification” (86) involves “both an objective and a subjective side” (87), the social aspects of objects are obscured: “Objectively a world of objects and relations between things springs into being (the world of commodities and their movements on the market)” (87). In a capitalist society, the origins and social significance of the commodity disappear into a seemingly endless supply of autonomous consumer objects. But there is a very real human consequence to this process of reification: “Subjectively—where the market economy has been fully developed—a man’s activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity which, subject to the non-human objectivity of the natural laws of society, must go its own way independently of man just like any consumer article” (87). Even one’s own time, one’s own labor, becomes a thing. One’s life becomes a series of time cards and pay stubs (or, in a postindustrial service economy, a series of rote interactions and electronic bank deposits).

Hejinian is well aware of the power of the commodity form within a capitalist society, and she calls attention to it in *My Life*. According to Michel Delville,

Hejinian’s own avant-gardist poetics seem to embrace, rather than reject, the dominant discourses supporting the capitalist machinery. By doing so, *My Life* often succeeds in undermining them from within, using a method reminiscent of Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s soup cans,
which celebrate the obscene glamour of commodity fetishism at the same time as they indirectly foster a critical appraisal of the dynamics of the capitalist system. By combining a variety of discursive categories and suggesting the existence of multisynaptic relationships between them, Hejinian’s prose exposes normative narratives and their generic by-products as so many resultants of particular societal or cultural codes. (211–212)

In other words, Hejinian’s writing examines the subjective mystifications surrounding the reification of labor into commodities. She explores the ways in which one thinks about and talks about the commodity form, the subjective relation to the commodity’s apparent objectivity. However, her treatment of commodities in My Life does not exactly parallel Warhol’s pop sensibility. A silkscreen reproduction of a mass-manufactured commodity like a soup can suggests infinite reproducibility. It suggests endless sameness. The commodities in My Life, on the other hand, are framed by autobiography. The poet’s individual experience gives them a degree of personal significance that complicates a potential critique of commodity fetishism. The sentence “What one passes in the Plymouth” does not suggest the same emotional distance as a Warhol soup can; rather, this sentence invokes the poet’s childhood and is arguably tinged with melancholy (ML 11). After all, one might regret all the sights that one has passed as a child in the family sedan. Similarly, the statement “Even posterity, alas, will know Sears” (81) is not a poker-faced reference to consumer culture; rather, it expresses resignation and perhaps nostalgia as well.

Many commodities in My Life are linked to the domestic sphere, and any potential critique of commodity fetishism becomes intertwined with a potentially critical examination of gender norms. The difference between description and critique is not always obvious, but many of the depictions of commodities implicitly question patriarchal ideologies. For example, a reference to Jell-O in the fourth section of the poem may be read as a simple memory of childhood, or as a sort of social allegory in miniature: “Each bit of jello had been molded in tiny doll dishes, each trembling orange bit a different shape, but all otherwise the same” (17). Clearly, “jello” and “tiny doll dishes” belong to the world of childhood play, but such play at domesticity is also a form of gender training. To the extent that playing with dolls or playing house conditions girls for potential roles as wives and mothers, we might consider such play a form
of social molding. Though it is not necessary to read this sentence allegorically, Hejinian places a relatively heavy emphasis on the fact that the molds are “all otherwise the same.” It requires very little reaching to see these references to Jell-O and doll toys as a commentary on Eisenhower-era social conformity, particularly within the family. A similar critique may be found later in the fourth section, where we encounter “A urinating doll, half-buried in the sand” (19). Presumably, this is a toy designed to appeal to—or instill—maternal instincts in girls. While I do not want to read too much into this uncanny image, it is clear that—in the context of the poem—this doll represents not so much “the obscene glamour of commodity fetishism” as a child’s symbolic rejection of a caretaking role. The misuse of this commodity calls attention to the coercive assumptions about gender that underlie its manufacture. As the poem progresses from childhood to motherhood, domestic commodities continue to appear, though they are not all as symbolically freighted. Images of “a different colored toothbrush for each member of the family” (45), “a loaf of Wonder Bread for the ducks” (62), or “food for a Gerber baby” (90) all point to the commodification of domestic space and motherhood. That the marketplace has invaded the home should come as no surprise. “Reification,” Lukács explains, “requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange” (History 91). By foregrounding the role of commodities in her own life, Hejinian calls attention to this fact. Childhood, adulthood, motherhood, maturity—all phases of life produce the need for new commodities. Ultimately, it seems that the process of commodification distorts all aspects of postmodern life—even the most basic perceptions of time and space: “Within walking distance I went to shop to Muzak with its chewy beat between things of the same kind that are separated only by very small amounts of time” (ML 85). It is not even clear if the “things of the same kind” are songs or more tangible products on the shelves. Consumer culture is modular and repetitious. It changes the way one relates to objects that possess an exchange value. But as we shall see, exchange value is ultimately a limited measure of an object’s significance.

**Thing Theory and Feminist Materialism**

In his work on Anglo-American modernism, Bill Brown has undertaken an extensive investigation into the literary significance of discrete material objects. According to Brown, objects serve as formal models for modernist art and literature, in that the “effort to fathom the concrete,
and to imagine the work of art as a different mode of mimesis—not one that serves to represent a thing, but one that seeks to attain the status of a thing—is a fundamental strain of modernism, as characteristic of Stein as it is of Malevich, of Picasso as it is of Zukofsky” (Sense 3). This “different mode of mimesis” is something we have already seen in Zukofsky’s desire for formal objectification. But objects serve as more than ideal structural metaphors within modernist literature. They also function as things, to use Brown’s term. For Brown, the “thing” occupies its own philosophical category. Essentially, things equal pure physical presence. Whereas an object implies a subject, a thing implies only its own materiality. Thus, using a rather festive metaphor, Brown notes that “although the object was what was asked to join the dance in philosophy, things may still lurk in the shadows of the ballroom and continue to lurk there after the subject and object have done their thing, long after the party is over” (“Theory” 3). Things represent “what is excessive in objects,…what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects” (5). One can even speak of an “object / thing dialectic” (5), with the primary distinction between the terms being functionality. Objects have a utilitarian function, if only as cultural signifiers; things, on the other hand, become legible precisely because they are not functional:

As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A thing, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (Brown, “Theory” 4)

“Thingness,” then, is a property of objects; it describes a particular materiality, opacity, and nonfunctionality of objects in their relation to subjects (or perhaps one should say in their nonrelation to subjects). But
Despite their lack of utility, things are inextricably intertwined with our experience of the quotidian. As Brown explains, “[M]odernism, whatever its intentions, can help to focus attention not just on things as such, but on the place things occupy in daily life; the place they occupy, if you will, in the history of the human being; the pressure they exert on us to engage them as something other than mere surfaces” (Sense 12).

For a Marxian critic, Brown’s exploration of “the place things occupy in daily life” and “in the history of the human being” will inevitably lead to a discussion of the commodity form and the reification of labor. Brown does take the role of the commodity into account, but ultimately his “thing theory” (the title of his essay on the subject) tends toward an almost mystical understanding of the relationship between people and objects: “Just as people collect objects to manifest themselves physically in space, so objects incorporate people to define themselves metaphysically in and over time. This is how they attain a ritual value beyond the exigencies of exchange and use” (Sense 186). This “ritual value”—a value that exists outside of both economic and utilitarian considerations—is readily apparent in the Virginia Woolf story “Solid Objects” (1920), which Brown discusses in his essay “The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism).” Though Woolf’s “Solid Objects” is far from an obvious modernist antecedent to Hejinian’s My Life, both works deal with the role of things in psychological development. In the latter, things become intertwined with the process of learning and growing up; in the former, an obsession with things leads to a process of psychological regression. Moreover, there is an interesting tangential connection between “Solid Objects” and Hejinian’s poem: Both works incorporate prominent descriptions of pieces of glass collected on the beach. This coincidental material detail has a broader methodological utility, in that it provides a focal point for a comparison between modernist and postmodernist materiality.

The beach glass in My Life appears in the second sentence of the second section of the poem, directly across from the superscription “As for we who ‘love to be astonished’”: “My father had filled an old apothecary jar with what he called ‘sea glass,’ bits of old bottles rounded and textured by the sea, so abundant on beaches” (10). In terms of exchange value, the sea glass is worthless. In terms of symbolic value, it has nothing of the imaginatively transformative power of, for example, Wallace Stevens’s jar on a hill in Tennessee, which takes over its environment and makes “the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill” (Stevens 46). Hejinian’s jar full of sea glass is, rather, a simple material
detail associated with childhood. One can imagine a traditional autobiography in which the sea glass comes, over the course of a chapter, to represent a father’s meticulous personality or obsession with detail or love of the ocean. But this larger framework is absent in My Life. The surrounding sentences add nothing to our understanding of the glass: “You spill the sugar when you lift the spoon. My father had filled an old apothecary jar with what he called ‘sea glass,’ bits of old bottles rounded and textured by the sea, so abundant on beaches. There is no solitude” (10). Perhaps an absence of solitude in the home contributes to the father’s need to collect glass on the beach, but such a reading is conjectural. Beyond their contiguity, there is no necessary relation between these three sentences.

In Woolf’s story, on the other hand, the beach glass functions as part of a larger narrative structure. The glass first appears as a kind of distraction from pressing intellectual concerns. The story’s two characters, John and Charles—politically ambitious young Englishmen—are walking on the beach, discussing politics, when John finds the glass:

So Charles, whose stick had been slashing the beach for half a mile or so, began skimming flat pieces of slate over the water; and John, who had exclaimed “Politics be damned!” began burrowing his fingers down, down, into the sand. As his hand went further and further beyond the wrist, so that he had to hitch his sleeve a little higher, his eyes lost their intensity, or rather the background of thought and experience which give an inscrutable depth to the eyes of grown people disappeared, leaving only the clear transparent surface, expressing nothing but wonder, which the eyes of young children display. No doubt the act of burrowing in the sand had something to do with it. He remembered that, after digging for a little, the water oozes round your finger-tips; the hole then becomes a moat; a well; a spring; a secret channel to the sea. As he was choosing which of these things to make it, still working his fingers in the water, they curled round something hard—a full drop of solid matter—and gradually dislodged a large irregular lump, and brought it to the surface. When the sand coating was wiped off, a green tint appeared. It was a lump of glass, so thick as to be almost opaque; the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape, so that it was impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler or window-pane; it was nothing but glass; it was almost a precious stone. (Woolf 102–103)
Within the larger context of the story, the glass represents the desire for a return to childish naïveté, for a regression to a childish fascination with the material. The search for the glass provides an escape from abstraction and ethical considerations (“Politics be damned!”) and a return to a more immediate, material relationship with one’s surroundings. As John’s hand burrows into the wet sand, “his eyes lost their intensity” and “the background of thought and experience which give an inscrutable depth to the eyes of grown people disappeared”; he is left with the strangeness of the material world, his eyes “expressing nothing but wonder.” This wonderment is not produced by a conscious choice but by a physical act: “No doubt the act of burrowing in the sand has something to do with it.” When his hand encounters the unexpected piece of glass, Woolf’s shifting language represents the strangeness of this new discovery. It is “something hard,” “a full drop of solid matter,” an “irregular lump” and then finally “a lump of glass.” It is a thing becoming object, and this indeterminacy never quite escapes it. Because “the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape,” it becomes “impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler or window-pane; it was nothing but glass; it was almost a precious stone.” The ocean has erased the original identity of the glass as commodity—the glass as exchange value—and what remains is something more than a mass-produced commodity but less than “a precious stone.” The almost grotesque mediating space that the object occupies is the space of a thing, an unidentifiable lump of matter. And yet, in the larger context of Woolf’s story, the glass does not conserve its fundamental ambiguity. Within the structure of the story, the glass takes on a symbolic role. In John’s home,

the lump of glass had its place upon the mantelpiece, where it stood heavy upon a little pile of bills and letters, and served not only as an excellent paper-weight, but also as a natural stopping place for the young man’s eyes when they wandered from his book. Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it. (Woolf 104)

Placed on top of “a little pile of bills and letters”—the business to which John should be attending—the lump of glass comes to symbolize a
distraction from daily affairs, from the business of the world. It becomes the objective correlative of a regression to childhood. The lump of glass comes to symbolize John’s haunting desire for escape from the pressures of a burgeoning political career. By the end of the story, he has become an obsessive collector of worthless debris; he is “no longer young” and his chances of becoming a successful politician have passed him by (Woolf 106).

The symbolic meaning of the lump of glass accrues over the course of “Solid Objects.” To the extent that the lump of glass can be seen as representative of modernist things in general, one might say that the modern thing derives meaning from context. It is significant that the glass is placed on top of the bills and letters, and that it functions as a distraction for eyes wandering from a book. Hejinian’s jar of sea glass on the mantel presents a rather striking contrast. There is no unified plot or symbolic system within which to place the jar of glass. It remains one thing among many in the paratactic progression of My Life. In this sense, Hejinian’s representation of things recalls Fredric Jameson’s description of postmodern style generally—and that of Language poets specifically—as fundamentally schizophrenic. While proponents of Language poetry have not generally appreciated Jameson’s diagnosis, the radical parataxis of My Life does bring to mind Jameson’s concept of “a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers” (Postmodernism 26). Thus, the difference between Woolf’s and Hejinian’s depictions of beach glass can be read as a difference in modernist and postmodernist signifying practices. The inutility of the modernist thing is, to an extent, recuperated by a linear, hypotactic discursive structure and by a symbolic framework. This is not the case with the postmodern variant. In fact, the opacity and non-functionality of things is accentuated in the paratactic postmodern text, precisely because hierarchical semiotic structures are absent.

In the process of comparing objects in Woolf’s and Hejinian’s texts, I have attempted to demonstrate that Brown’s thing theory serves as a useful lens through which to view My Life. But to understand the full significance of Hejinian’s exploration of materiality, it is necessary to consider not only the function of objects in and of themselves but also the role that gender plays in our understanding of these objects. Although I do not wish to proffer an epistemology that is based on an essentializing notion of sexual identity, gender does indeed condition our understanding of the material world. Nancy C. M. Hartsock argues this point in Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism (1983). In her revision of orthodox Marxism, Hartsock suggests that Marxist
materialism cannot adequately account for women’s experience. The problem lies, in part, with Marx’s understanding of labor, which does not account for domestic work:

Given the overall positions taken by Marx, one can conclude that for him the value of labor power depends only on labor power incorporated into commodities; no attention is given to the value of labor power consumed directly or incorporated into use values. Women’s labor as such vanishes in this theoretical move, since both when Marx wrote and today an important percentage of women’s labor power takes the form of use values consumed in the home. Both the production of use values in the home and the labor required to consume commodities brought home are disproportionately done by women. (Hartsock 147)

Of course, the fact that women perform a disproportionately large share of domestic labor does not preclude additional employment outside the home. In a postmodern, postindustrial milieu, women are constantly forced to negotiate between different forms of labor. Having worked simultaneously as a poet, editor, and mother, Hejinian might be considered representative in this sense. But Hartsock’s general point remains relevant: Marxism is too fixated on the commodity form to appreciate the importance (both practical and theoretical) of domestic labor. From this recognition, a revisionist feminist epistemology can emerge:

[J]ust as Marx’s understanding of the world from the standpoint of the proletariat enabled him to go beneath bourgeois ideology, so a feminist standpoint can allow us to descend further into materiality to an epistemological level at which we can better understand both why patriarchal institutions and ideologies take such perverse and deadly forms and how both theory and practice can be redirected in more liberatory directions. (231)

This empowering feminist epistemology is—perhaps paradoxically—predicated upon the gendered division of labor:

[B]ecause the sexual division of labor means that much of the work involved in reproducing labor power is done by women, and because much of the male worker’s contact with nature outside the factory
is mediated by a woman, the vision of reality which grows from the female experience is deeper and more thoroughgoing than that available to the worker. (234)

In short, orthodox Marxism is based on Marx’s study of male-dominated factory production. Marxism privileges labor that occurs outside the home, in the production of commodities. But “the female experience” that Hartsock describes is precisely not dependent upon the production and circulation of commodities. Though key aspects of “reproducing labor power” are obviously based on a person’s sex, both women and men could, theoretically, develop a more profound understanding of materiality by experiencing objects outside of their function as exchange values. As Lukács explains, “rational objectification conceals above all the immediate—qualitative and material—character of things as things. When use-values appear universally as commodities they acquire a new objectivity, a new substantive which they did not possess in an age of episodic exchange and which destroys their original and authentic substantive” (History 92). In other words, we appreciate the true material character of things—their “authentic substantiability”—when they exist to be used, rather than merely exchanged. Commodity fetishism distorts our relationship both to objects and to our own labor.

While Hartsock’s feminist “vision of reality” remains somewhat provisional and speculative, the alternative—a patriarchal sense of reality—is all too familiar: “[M]asculine experience when replicated as epistemology leads to a world conceived as (and in fact) inhabited by a number of fundamentally hostile others whom one comes to know by means of opposition (even death struggle) and yet with whom one must construct a social relation in order to survive” (Hartsock 242). This is the world of the marketplace, of competition for scarce resources, of commodity fetishism, and of class struggle. This “masculine experience . . . replicated as epistemology” has aesthetic repercussions as well. As we have seen, Silliman originally thought of the Fibonacci form employed in Tjanting as a formal allegory of class competition. At the structural level, the poem instantiates the hostility and struggle that Hartsock finds inherent in a masculine epistemology. Hejinian’s My Life, on the other hand, requires no such duality. Instead, her life poem foregrounds values associated with Hartsock’s feminist vision:

Women’s construction of self in relation to others leads in an opposite direction—toward opposition to dualisms of any sort; valuation of
concrete, everyday life; a sense of a variety of connectednesses and continuities both with other persons and with the natural world. If material life structures consciousness, women’s relationally defined existence, bodily experience of boundary challenges, and activity of transforming both physical objects and human beings must be expected to result in a world view to which dichotomies are foreign. (242)

In many ways, Hartsock’s language could serve as a blueprint for Hejinian’s poem. *My Life* involves a “construction of self” based on the “valuation of concrete, everyday life” and “a sense of a variety of connectednesses and continuities both with other persons and with the natural world.” As we have seen, Hejinian is well aware of the ways in which commodities impinge upon daily life. But her poem also undertakes a thorough exploration of quotidian objects as they function outside of the capitalist economy. In short, the world in *My Life* is not reducible to capitalist class relations, and the objects in the world are not reducible to the commodity form.

Hejinian’s attention to everyday objects and quotidian material details is evident throughout the poem. At times, the objects under consideration serve primarily as mnemonic devices. In the following sentence from the fifth section, for example, the enumerated objects are associated with the poet’s grandparents: “The room, in fact, was used as a closet as well, for as one sat at the telephone table, one faced a row of my grandparents’ overcoats, raincoats, and hats, which were hung from a line of heavy, polished wooden hooks” (*ML* 21). Similarly, the “glass snail . . . among real camellias in a glass bowl upon the table” (21) seems to recall a vivid childhood impression. In this context, the word “real” conveys something of a child’s wonder. Although the glass snail and the glass bowl may have begun their lives as commodities, they function as more than congealed labor in the poem. They have something of the mystical property of Brown’s things. Objects in the natural world are also significant in structuring youthful experiences that will later return as memories. It is presumably the poet who discovers “A pansy suddenly, a web, a trail remarkably’s a snail’s” (18) and encounters “an enormous egg, sitting in the vineyard—an enormous rock-shaped egg” (18). So inexplicable is this egg that it must be conceptualized twice, the second time in comparison with something else (a rock). It is not hard to imagine this egg producing the same effect as John’s digging in the wet sand: “[T]he background of thought and experience which gives an inscrutable
depth to the eyes of grown people disappeared, leaving only the clear transparent surface, expressing nothing but wonder, which the eyes of young children display” (Woolf 102–103). It is no accident that many of the most purely material objects in My Life appear early on, in the sections loosely corresponding to the poet’s childhood. Spider webs and snail trails provide vivid early impressions of the natural world—a world that is idyllically sheltered from the exigencies of the marketplace.

**Metonymy**

If objects can function as things in and of themselves, outside of larger economic structures, they can also function as tropes within a text. Brown writes of the “vertiginous capacity” of objects “to be both things and signs (symbols, metonyms, or metaphors) of something else,” and it is this middle term—metonymy—that is most relevant to My Life (Sense 11). The prevalence of metonymy in the poem is one of its defining features. Christopher Beach finds that My Life “is associative and metonymic” (72), and Hilary Clark finds that the mnemonic techniques of the poem are produced “through forms of modulated repetition and metonymic association” (332). “Hejinian writes to trace the real movements of thought from day to day,” Clark explains. “The basic ‘rhythm of cognition,’ of memory itself, is indeed poetic or rhetorical—that is, associative and repetitive. In its oral-poetic style, My Life is arguably closer to the springs of memory, to the way we truly remember, than is autobiography based on careful narrative shaping and selection” (332). For Hejinian, metonymy is also the primary literary technique involved in an exploratory poetics of description:

If one posits descriptive language and, in a broader sense, poetic language as a language of inquiry, with analogies to the scientific methods of the explorers, then I anticipate that the principal trope will be the metonym, what Roman Jakobson calls “association by contiguity.” … Metonymy moves attention from thing to thing; its principle is combination rather than selection. Compared to metaphor, which depends on code, metonym preserves context, foregrounds interrelationship. And again in comparison to metaphor, which is based on similarity, and in which meanings are conserved and transferred from one thing to something said to be like it, the metonymic world is unstable. While metonymy maintains the intactness and
discreteness of particulars, its paratactic perspective gives it multiple vanishing points. (*Inquiry* 148)

By preserving “the intactness and discreteness of particulars,” metonymy leads to larger synecdochic effects. It recreates a particular world through an invocation of particular objects. Yet the particular objects that constitute a larger description never lose their own objective particularity, and this attention to particularity gives metonymy a kind of scientific specificity:

The metonym, as I understand it, is a cognitive entity, with immediate ties to the logics of perception. To the extent that it is descriptive, or at the service of description, as is true in my own work, it also has a relationship to empiricism. That is, to the extent that metonymy conserves perception of the world of objects, conserves their quiddity, their particular precisions, it is a “scientific” description. (*Inquiry* 151)

The preservation of the “quiddity”—the “thingness”—of individual objects is the primary distinction between metaphor and metonymy. Where a metaphor replaces one object with another for the sake of a poetic effect, a metonym represents the object in its connection to a larger, contiguous world. In *My Life*, the world invoked by metonymy tends to be domestic, natural, or both. For example, the foliage in the following sentence suggests summer, suburbia and perhaps even the passing of the season: “We see only the leaves and branches of the trees close in around the house” (*ML* 14). It is unclear whether one is seeing these “leaves and branches” from within or from outside the house, but in either case they present a hint of disrepair, a subtle suggestion of nature creeping back on human habitat. A stronger metonymic invocation of decay and disrepair occurs later in the third section: “The roots of the locust tree were lifting the corner of the little cabin” (15). In a romantic mode, such a process of decay—the crumbling foundation of a cabin—might serve as a symbol or metaphor, as in Wordsworth’s “The Ruined Cottage,” where the “ruined house” (30), “naked walls” (30), and “well / Half-choked with willow flowers and weeds” (62–63) ultimately come to represent the human tragedy that has caused the desertion of the cottage. But in *My Life*, such a larger, symbolic framework is absent. Yet leaves,
branches, and roots are deeply significant in that they may be attributed
to what Hartsock terms “a specifically feminist materialism” (247). As
we have seen, a feminist epistemology involves a “valuation of concrete,
everyday life” and “a sense of a variety of connectednesses and continu-
ities both with other persons and with the natural world” (242). Many
of Hejinian’s metonyms point to just such a sense of connection between
human activity and natural processes. For example, we encounter “Fruit
peels and the heels of bread” that have been “left to get moldy” (ML 22);
“A string of eucalyptus pods” that has been “hung by the window to
discourage flies” (28); and a “glass fixture in the kitchen” that is “covered
with grease and tiny black flies that had died in it” (53). There is a certain
weirdness to such images, in that they represent the residue of human
activity without specifically representing any one person. Someone has
peeled the fruit, sliced the bread, hung the eucalyptus pods, and cooked
the meals, but we encounter only objects that point back to such activi-
ties. It is as though the poet has estranged herself from her own life,
and—even as she writes—is encountering it for the first time.

Although the use of metonymy can serve to defamiliarize domestic
objects, and thereby to heighten a sense of their material presence, it
can also be used in the pursuit of more familiar literary ends. In the fol-
lowing passage, for example, Hejinian self-consciously uses metonymy
as part of an elevated, poetic style that occasionally emerges from the
prose poetry of My Life: “The sudden brief early morning breeze, the
first indication of a day’s palpability, stays high in the trees, while flash-
ing silver and green the leaves flutter, a bird sweeps from one branch
to another, the indistinct shadows lift off the crumpled weeds, smoke
rises from the gravel quarry—all this is metonymy” (81). Attention trav-
els from one object to the next, beginning in the sky with the breeze
and the trees and the fluttering leaves, then moving downward from
the bird to the weeds to the gravel quarry. The language has become
quite literary, full of alliteration (“brief” / “breeze,” “flashing” / “flutter,”
“bird” / “branch”), rhyme and near-rhyme (“breeze” / “trees” / “leaves” /
“weeds”), and striking rhythms produced by the juxtaposition of mono-
and polysyllabic words (“day’s palpability” / “indistinct shadows lift
off”). Moreover, the literary trope is named and exemplified in the same
sentence. A similar allusion to metonymy recurs later in this same sec-
tion (the twenty-second): “The real adversary of my determination was
determinism, regulating and limiting the range and degree of difference
between things of one day and things of the next. I got it from Darwin,
Freud, and Marx. Not fragments but metonymy” (83). Certainly, one
could “get” notions of determinism “from Darwin, Freud, and Marx,” but their invocation is not metonymic in the sense that Hejinian uses the term. The comparison of fragments to metonymy here functions as a general, metatextual comment on the representation of the world within the poem. As Beach points out, “The text constantly directs the reader toward a metatextual layer that supplements its ‘literal’ meaning” (70). This is such a metatextual moment. Though the poem sometimes presents the world as fragmentary and incomplete, it also presents objects as metonymic and associative. Again, in Beach’s words, “The associative network of My Life occurs both on the immediate level of the individual section, where meaning is generated by metonymic association and sonic resemblance, and on the macroscopic level of the entire poem, where through repetition and chronological evolution the ‘life’ of the speaker takes shape” (72–73). In a sense, then, a metonymic procedure governs not only the examination of individual objects but also the repetition and recontextualization of particular sentence-objects. Metonymic association is not just a technique; it is a formal device.

The expansion of metonymy to the level of formal procedure is a key difference between Hejinian’s postmodern use of objects and Woolf’s modernist treatment of things. According to Brown, “The fragment appears in ‘Solid Objects’ as the figure of the material metonym whose metonymic function has been arrested—the unconsummated metonym, as it were. The unconsummated metonym is the figure, or the conceptual image, that Woolf offers us to think the object/thing dialectic, to think the world anew” (“Secret” 22). But this “material metonym” does not affect form at the level of the sentence. Unlike My Life, Woolf’s story does not employ a strictly paratactic juxtaposition of phrases. The narrative develops coherently and chronologically, with each sentence transitioning more or less smoothly into the next. In My Life, on the other hand, the metonymic treatment of particular objects has a formal corollary in the paratactic treatment of individual sentences. There is particularity and contiguity, but no subordination. Metonymy provides a “paratactic perspective” (Hejinian, Inquiry 148), and metonymic, object-oriented writing requires a paratactic form. As David R. Jarraway points out, this metonymic / paratactic procedure facilitates the rejection of closure that Hejinian has theorized: “The distributive agency of metonymy . . . powered by nothing more than a kind of Lacanian desire to repeat itself, remains faithful to the openness of textual production” (330). In short, metonymy is both trope and procedure in My Life. It
provides a way of presenting objects, as well as a means to the production of an objectivist text.

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As we have seen, *My Life* issues an implicit challenge to the commodification of the quotidian, not just by calling attention to the role of commodities within everyday life, but also by exploring the particularity and specificity of objects beyond their exchange values. No object, no event, no individual sentence is subordinate within the larger procedural structure. Each exists in its own particularity, yet each acts contextually on the others. (And in this sense Hejinian’s treatment of objects and object-sentences is similar to Silliman’s paratactic Fibonacci procedure in *Tjanting*.) The meaning of a particular sentence acts interstitially on contiguous sentences, and the meaning of a particular object develops from its juxtaposition to other objects, and to the totality of the larger world. To highlight the uncommodifiable substantiality of language and objects is not to ignore the reality of a capitalist economic base or superstructure. On the contrary, Hejinian’s descriptive poetics offers a way of thinking about language and objects that avoids the reductive rationalism of the profit motive. Within capitalism, materiality is always subordinate to surplus value. But within an individual life—and within *My Life* in particular—the meaning that exists in excess of production and consumption, utility and exchange, is a major part of the experience of living, even within a late capitalist society.17 In an era in which alternatives to the logic of capitalism are becoming increasingly scarce, Hejinian’s attempt to think through and beyond commodity fetishism is no small achievement.
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In this book, I have examined the ways in which proceduralism—a particular formal development in avant-garde American poetry—encodes a record of the poet’s labor and registers a commentary on more generalized working conditions within postindustrial society. It is probably self-evident that I find this type of formal literary criticism useful not only as a means of exploring certain aesthetic developments but also of investigating the social, political, economic, and ideological conditions within which a particular group of poets lived and worked. But the utility of such an undertaking is by no means a given in the current field of American studies, even among scholars whose primary archive remains literary. After all, avant-garde poetry occupies a marginal position within postmodern American culture. Surely, one might surmise, there are more direct ways to approach issues of labor, production, and class than through a group of texts that are, to varying degrees, erudite, esoteric, and oppositional. To gain insight into American society during a period of affluence and increasing global influence, wouldn’t one be better off investigating more mainstream cultural developments? Why not discuss James Brown or the Ramones? Why not analyze Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969) or Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979)? Without a doubt, popular music and film have done more to shape postmodern culture than experimental poetry, so these questions are hardly rhetorical.

Nicholas Brown confronts this issue in *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (2005). He suggests that “it is fair to speculate that a new hierarchy among the arts may be arising—in the culture at large, has perhaps arisen—in which music and film play a greater role than poetry and fiction,” and he points to “the increasing importance of the culture industry to the U.S. economy” and
to the importance of “postmodernity as a mode of production” (175). And of course he is right. Today, music and film are far more popular cultural forms than literature. This fact ought to give any politically engaged poetry critic pause. If one wants to put one’s finger on America’s cultural pulse at the beginning of the Reagan era, one now has to consider the possibility that studying Ron Silliman’s Tjanting is less useful than, for example, watching Steven Spielberg’s Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981). But in fact the imputation of an absolute opposition between avant-garde poetry and the culture industry is suspect. Brown repeatedly highlights the concept of totality, and it is as part of a larger sociocultural whole that one must see any cultural production. “What the concept of totality gives us,” Brown explains, “is, paradoxically, access to the radical incompleteness of what appears spontaneously as solid and whole. Complete, self-evident things (say, a commodity, a democracy, a novel) are in fact incomplete and always derive their being from something else (the production cycle, the world economy, the concept and institution of literature)” (10). This concept of totality allows Brown to juxtapose high modernist European literature to the African postcolonial literature of the next generation, and it is this same concept that makes poetics as useful as film studies for understanding postmodern culture. If all cultural commodities are incomplete in themselves, then the historically committed critic will inevitably have to reconstruct a context for the cultural artifact in question. One can do this with experimental poetry, popular music, film, or—theoretically—any other cultural form. The importance of the scholarly work lies first and foremost in the reconstruction of the context, not in the aesthetic or cultural merit of the form itself.

The notion that all cultural forms encode valuable historical and social insights is currently ascendant within American studies. In Hart Crane: After His Lights (2006), Brian M. Reed characterizes the “New American Studies” as a field that “has refigured ‘America’ within a transatlantic framework, stressed the importance of interdisciplinary investigation, and established the multiplicity, mutability, and imbrication of class, gender, nationality, race, sex, and sexuality in the production of any cultural artifact” (9). This summary of the issues at stake in American studies could also be applied more generally to cultural studies, (post)modernist studies, ethnic studies, and so forth. And it brings us back to the question, why avant-garde poetry? When Barrett Watten argues that poetry “internalizes social and historical reflexivity” (Constructivist xviii), is he merely making a specific application of a cultural studies commonplace? Could we just as well substitute any other cultural form? The answer, it seems, is more complicated than a simple yes or no. As Reed points
out, race, class, gender, nationality, and sexuality are all operative in the formation of any given cultural artifact; one can indeed approach a given historical moment from a variety of directions. At the same time, not all cultural artifacts explicitly call upon us to reconsider our ways of thinking and of being in the world. Avant-garde poetry, I would argue, does.

Such a claim is apt to sound excessive. If poetry has become irrelevant to mainstream American culture—if it has become a mere bourgeois leftover, with the same political utility as piano recitals and decorative Latin quotations—then to speak of poetry as a potential form of resistance to dominant ideologies is excessive indeed. But there are poets writing today who have argued convincingly that poetry can provide such a means of resistance; perhaps no one has argued this better than Charles Bernstein. Though Bernstein has only made a few brief appearances in this book, his thinking has profoundly influenced both contemporary poetics in general and this critic in particular. In his essay collection *Content’s Dream*, Bernstein, writing in a hybrid style somewhere between compressed cultural criticism and prose poetry, provides a theoretical framework for understanding linguistic experimentalism as political resistance:

It goes like this. “Clear writing is the best picture of clear thinking.” Providing a clear view. (An imperial clarity for an imperial world.) An official version of reality, in which ethics is transformed into moral code & aesthetics into clean shaving, is labeled the public reality & we learn this as we would a new language. (Orthography & expository clarity are just other words for diction & etiquette.) (25)

In Bernstein’s highly compressed argument, clarity—that elusive goal of expository writing programs—is oppressive. The clear, “official” perspective on the world becomes prescriptive as well as descriptive. Ethics, a way of thinking about human behavior, becomes “moral code,” a way of regulating human behavior. Aesthetics, a way of thinking about artistic value, becomes “clean shaving,” an arbitrary means of asserting and interpreting social status. Ultimately, “public reality”—explicitly compared to “a new language”—is coercive. The rules of writing become the rules of social behavior. In short, for Bernstein, “Standardized spelling, layout, & punctuation enter into a world of standardization,” a world where “[t]he understanding begins to be lost that we are each involved in the constitution of language—that our actions reconstitute—change—reality” (26). Fortunately, there is an obverse to Bernstein’s theory of “imperial clarity”
and standardization. As a form of language in its own right, poetry can work against standardization and the alienation that it entails: “The promise of the return of the world can [be] (& has always been) fulfilled by poetry. Even before the process of class struggle is complete. Poetry, centered on the condition of its wordness—words of a language not out there but in here, language the place of our commonness—is a momentary restoration of ourselves to ourselves” (29–30). Needless to say, the kind of language that would restore “ourselves to ourselves” is not the standardized business English of the daily newspaper (or even the academic poetry workshop) but the radically disjunctive experimentation of poets like Ted Berrigan, David Antin, Ron Silliman, and Lyn Hejinian.

Bernstein’s *Content’s Dream* is now more than twenty years old, and its rhetoric of poetic resistance has already begun to feel historical rather than contemporary. The avant-gardism of the Language poets is linked to a moment late in the cold war when adherence to a Marxian critical paradigm implied a subversive refusal of stark ideological allegiances. The binary capitalist West / communist East no longer exists, and Marxism itself has come to be as much an explanatory device as an oppositional politics, a way to think about global flows of capital that none of us, individually, is able to affect. Yet the fact that Bernstein’s critique has slipped into history hardly makes it the less valuable. As Georg Lukács reminds us over and over in various formulations, history is not simply what is temporally distant; it is also “the prehistory of the present” (*Novel* 176). If we want to know what modes of resistance are possible in the present moment, we need to know what modes of resistance were possible in the past. Watching a Spielberg movie from 1981 may tell us something about postmodern culture and the collective fantasies of postindustrial American society, but it will tell us next to nothing about the possibilities of resistance within that society. Avant-garde American poetry, on the other hand, shows us a range of nonstandard (one might, in a laudatory sense, even say “deviant”) linguistic practices that resist the logic of the culture industry and reject the seemingly inevitable alienation of people from their own labor and their own language. Berrigan, Antin, Silliman, and Hejinian literally put themselves—their time, their thought, their handwriting or keystrokes—into their work. They invent new ways of using language, and catalogue these new uses with forms that are self-reflexive and revelatory. If such avant-garde praxes exist only on the margins of mainstream American culture, then it is all the more important that they be documented by politically engaged, ideologically aware literary criticism.
Notes

Introduction: A Social Reading of Postmodern Poetic Form

1. In *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Fredric Jameson makes a stark distinction between intellectual and physical work. Nearly three decades later, in a postindustrial service economy, this stark distinction is less evident, though Jameson’s caution remains relevant: “One cannot without intellectual dishonesty assimilate the ‘production’ of texts… to the production of goods by factory workers: writing and thinking are not alienated labor in that sense, and it is surely fatuous for intellectuals to seek to glamorize their tasks—which can for the most part be subsumed under the rubric of the elaboration, reproduction, or critique of ideology—by assimilating them to real work on the assembly line and to the experience of the resistance of matter in genuine manual labor” (45).

2. “Over the course of the Cold War, the United States devoted enormous resources to achieving and maintaining an advantage over the Soviet Union in most areas of military technology. Indeed, for the better part of half a century, reliance on qualitative superiority was at the heart of US military strategy, and its pursuit was the central, defining feature of the entire American defense effort” (Friedberg 207).

3. Pointing to “the anticommunist crusade of the late 1940s and 1950s” as a major cause for the decline of American organized labor, Ellen Shrecker argues that “McCarthyism tamed American labor and brought it into the Cold War political consensus. Moreover, by preventing the nation’s unions, if so inclined, from building a broad-based social movement that challenged corporate values and championed social justice, McCarthyism narrowed political options for all Americans” (7). As a result of the McCarthy-era “purge of the left-led unions, there was no longer any question about [labor’s] support for American foreign policy. Both the CIO [Congress of Industrial Unions] and the AFL [American Federation of Labor] enlisted in the Cold War and, by the time they merged in the mid-fifties, most of the labor movement had been so thoroughly co-opted that its leaders provided cover for the CIA, and its conventions endorsed the war in Vietnam” (19).
4. “In the advanced capitalist countries in the boom years between 1950 and 1973, industry expanded by 5.5 percent on average and trade by 7.7 percent per annum” (Heller 105).

5. “Wherever consumerism dominated it reinforced the rule of capital by tending to undercut the significance of mass politics based on organized labor. The golden years saw a visible ebbing away of the political strength of organized labor, especially in the United States” (Heller 108).

6. “la consommation aliénée devient pour les masses un devoir supplémentaire à la production aliénée” (Debord 40).

7. OPEC raised the price of oil significantly in 1973 and again in 1979, and economic growth declined over the course of the decade (Heller 225). From 1974 to 1975, the international capitalist economy entered a recession that “definitely brought to a conclusion the so-called golden years of the previous two decades” (227).

8. The recession “was followed by a period of stagnation punctuated by bouts of persistent inflation,” and this economic stagnation “ended in another sharp recession in 1981–82” (Heller 227).

9. In her introduction to the “Reading for Form” (2000) special issue of Modern Language Quarterly, Susan J. Wolfson alludes to one scholar who, “though meaning to be hospitable to a formalist criticism refreshed for the 1990s, slipped into negative description and defensiveness” (2). Such defensiveness is not surprising, she notes, since “[t]he most influential stories in criticism typically proffered the narrowest versions of literary form to serve accounts of its covert work” (2). In Wolfson’s narrative of methodological rupture in a “post-(and anti-) New Critical climate” (3), critics rejected the “social isolationism” and “intellectual constraints” of formalist criticism, as well as the impulse to regard [form] as the product of a historically disinterested, internally coherent aesthetics” (2).

10. “Hé, monsieur, un roman est un miroir qui se promène sur une grande route. Tantôt il reflète à vos yeux l’azur des cieux, tantôt la fange des bourbiers de la route” (Stendhal 479).

11. In an interview with Charles Bernstein, Antin explained that, though he “was closer to the New York School” than the Beat poets, and though he “shared a world with John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara” in the sense that all three were art critics, he did not identify with “their investment in a kind of urban dandyism. Or their kind of connoisseurship” (Antin and Bernstein 96). With regard to “the next generation of poets,” Antin told Bernstein, “I suppose I had most in common with the so-called Language poets, though I was moving away from a procedural poetry just at the time you were all starting to work at it” (97). But if Antin’s formal methods were similar to those of the Language poets, his philosophical commitments were not, and he referred to the Language poets’ critical writings as “futile exercises based on antiquated linguistics, Marxian nostalgia and empty French and Russian theory” (97).

12. In Lukács’s words, “To posit oneself, to produce and reproduce oneself—that is reality” (15–16).
1 Procedural Form: An Overview

1. In this sense, the individualist ideology of romantic poetry recalls the ideological function of the abstract expressionist's studio space: “However humble, the studio is the domain of a single artist—even if other persons should occupy the space, or other functions occur there. To the extent that it is X’s studio, it is the domain of X’s authorship, the space in which a given X constructs himself as the independent creator/author of a unique product identified with his name” (Jones 3). Jones explicitly identifies elements of “the individualism and isolation of Romanticism” in abstract expressionist discourse (24).

2. Cf. Andy Warhol’s formulation, “I think everybody should be a machine” (qtd. in Jones 189).

3. By allowing for the mixing of “constraint and invention” in Language poetry, Conte seems to implicitly acknowledge the fact that proceduralism can incorporate authorial volition: “Language poets have explored the capacity of seriality to accommodate the many ways beyond the logical and the sequential in which things come together. These poets also account for a significant number of the procedural forms in which constraint and invention join to reveal meaning and not merely to confirm a thing already understood” (Conte 280).


5. Branden W. Joseph notes that “By 1951, Cage’s ideas of sound and silence were further coupled with an emerging interest in Zen Buddhism, which conceived of being and nothingness not as opposed to one another but as necessarily intertwined” (46).

6. I have tried to approximate some of the typographical effects of Mureau, but the constant changes in typeface and the justified right margin make it impossible here to do justice to the visual presentation.

7. See, for example, Antin’s description of his writing process in the introduction to Selected Poems (13–22).

8. See Dworkin, Language xii.

9. Of course, there are arguably no uses of language that entirely avoid politics. As Antin points out, “language is the cultural matrix in which the value systems that determine politics are held” (SP 14).

10. The quote is italicized in the original.

11. For more on the similarities between postmodern American procedural poetry and the proceduralism of digital poetics, see Glazier; in addition to the work of Jackson Mac Low, John Cage, Charles Bernstein, and Bernadette Mayer, he discusses the proceduralism of Silliman’s Tjanting and Hejinian’s My Life (128–135).

12. Funkhouser identifies the writing praxes of Dada and Oulipo as precursors of digital poetics (33–35). He also notes that “computer programs” are able to “emulate classical styles of poetry, written with strict parameters to engineer sonnets, renga, occasional poems, aphorisms, and other traditional forms” (34).
2 Making Poems: The “method” of Ted Berrigan’s Sonnets

1. Attridge also explains that “singularity functions like a signature” (64) a characteristic that ties in with my later discussion of Perloff’s notion of the poetic signature.

2. Notley’s assertion that sonnet XV proceeds “according to the formula, line 1, line 14, line 2, line 13, line 3, line 12, and so on in” (x) is, in fact, incorrect. The poem’s lines proceed according to the following reordering, from top to bottom: 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 12, 10, 8, 6, 4, 2. However, Notley’s formula does partially govern the procedure in sonnet XXI.

3. Here and throughout this chapter, I am indebted to Notley’s valuable comments and annotations.

4. Moreover, unlike its syntactically normative counterpart, sonnet XV manages not to sound like a pastiche of an O’Hara poem. (One thinks, for example, of O’Hara’s “Why I Am Not a Painter”—a poem that, like sonnet LIX, involves an implicit comparison between working techniques in painting and poetry.) In “The Business of Writing Poetry,” Berrigan acknowledges his tendency to mimic O’Hara, but he also argues that The Sonnets exceed mere imitation: “In 1960 and ’61, I wrote a bunch of poems saying ‘it’s 5:15 a.m. in New York City & I’m doing this & that & now I think this & this & this, & next this happens, & in conclusion I can say blank blank & blank.’ I thought I was blatantly imitating Frank O’Hara. But I was wonderfully dumb, and thank god! It turns out that when Frank was writing his poem and saying it is 4:16 a.m. in New York City, he meant that it wasn’t 4:16 a.m. at all. It was a flashback. Whereas when I wrote my poems, whatever time I said it was, that’s what time it was” (Level 67).

5. As Notley notes, the poem is derived from “an earlier, slightly different ordering of the sonnets” (Intro x).

6. In The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, Stein describes the encounter with Eliot at 27, rue de Fleurus, that caused her to write the poem: “Eliot and Gertrude Stein had a solemn conversation, mostly about split infinitives and other grammatical solecisms and why Gertrude Stein used them…. Eliot said that if he printed anything of Gertrude Stein’s in the Criterion it would have to be her very latest thing. They left… and she began to write a portrait of T.S. Eliot and called it the fifteenth of November, that being this day and so there could be no doubt but that it was her latest thing. It was all about wool is wool and silk is silk or wool is woollen [sic] and silk is silken. She sent it to T.S. Eliot and he accepted it but naturally he did not print it” (857).

7. “By 1963… Ted was also familiar with Tristan Tzara’s cutups, poems made from words cut out of newspapers and combined by a chance procedure” (Notley, Intro ix). Berrigan specifically describes the composition of sonnet LX as a cut-up procedure (TS 87).

8. See Berrigan’s journal entry from November 20, 1962 (CP 668).

9. William S. Burroughs’s postmodern application of Dada-derived cutup techniques provides an interesting prose analogue to Berrigan’s proceduralism.
Laszlo K. Géfin notes that “Burroughs has repeatedly made reference to the collage compositions of the Dadaists and Surrealists as the direct antecedents of the cutup” (91), and “Burroughs applauds the cutup because it, like the collage for the Dadaists, destroys univocality, uniformity, linear structure, and ownership” (95).

10. My translation.

11. Cf. Watkin on Silliman’s “site-specific procedurality wherein the dominance of such agencies as chance and found vocabularies in the field of procedural poetics can be sacrificed if the problem to hand requires different procedural rules” (526–527). Watkin finds in Silliman’s poetry a complex proceduralism similar to the proceduralism I have been documenting in Berrigan’s Sonnets: “It is hard, then, to place exactly where Silliman’s procedural works stand, if they are indeed procedural in any easily definable manner. They are not traditionally procedural in that, rejecting chance and vocabularies, they are overtly intentional, yet nor are they examples of an intentional poetics, as clearly this form of poetry is not a means of self-expression or self-making but quite the opposite” (526).

12. David Lehman finds Berrigan to be a sort of spokesperson for the working class within the New York School: “Living in cheap apartments in the East Village long before that was a fashionable quarter, Berrigan and his friends translated the idiom of the New York School across class lines. In the 1950s the movement was predominantly shorthaired, Harvard-educated, and well dressed in an Ivy League way (tweed jackets and pleated khaki trousers). The poetry project at St. Mark’s Church disseminated the gospel among the drug-taking, jeans-wearing, longhaired, antiwar children of rebellion” (Lehman 364). Kane points to class, as well as heterosexism, as key differences between first generation New York School poets and Second Generation followers: “The New York School poets—Koch, Schuyler, Ashbery, Guest, and O’Hara—really weren’t part of the Les Deux Mégots scene [a Lower East Side café where Second Generation poets gave readings from 1961 to 1963 (Kane 34, 39)] and were in fact, considered by some to be a bit too ‘uptown’ for the downtown crowd. The writer Jim Brodey, who knew Paul Blackburn during the 1960s, said of Blackburn’s attitude toward the New York School, ‘Paul Blackburn & I didn’t get along very well. He had this side of his personality that indulged in discouraging or competitiveness at least. MOMA / Edge of the Big Money school is what Blackburn called the New York School at that time.’ Some of the writers associated with the Lower East Side poetic community viewed the poets of the New York School as perhaps a little too urbane, witty, and chatty to be welcomed fully into the relatively macho heterosexual scene that initially dominated the Lower East Side scene” (Kane 41).


14. Notley explains that Berrigan’s “journal entry indicates the kind of compositional method used throughout The Sonnets, as well as the types of materials employed” (CP 668).

15. See Notley’s note (TS 86).
16. In various permutations, the first line of sonnet II will continue to turn up in The Sonnets. Cf. sonnets XVIII, XXX, XLII, LXXX, LXXXI, LXXXII, LXXXIII, and LXXXVIII.

17. In All Poet’s Welcome, Kane reproduces a 1971 photograph that seems to sum up the relationship between Berrigan and Ashbery. The two are posing for a picture in front of the St. Regis Hotel in New York City, Ashbery smartly dressed, Berrigan not, and the latter—in a gesture that is amusing but also rude—is holding his hand directly in front of Ashbery, so that his palm and fingers literally efface the older poet from the photograph.


3 The Tactics of the Text: Experimental Form in David Antin’s “Novel Poem”

1. Marjorie Perloff identifies section #244 ff. of the Philosophical Investigations as the specific source of Antin’s text (“Visual Text” 126).

2. The success of Antin’s talk poems has perhaps led critics to privilege his oral improvisation over his earlier language experiments. For Barry Alpert, “Getting up on his feet and talking is Antin’s ideal and practical embodiment of human intellectual activity” (190). Sherman Paul puts it quite succinctly: “Talk poems. Antin’s inevitable form” (47). Of course, the division between orality and écriture is far from clear in Antin’s talk poems, as Henry Sayre points out: “And yet, for all Antin’s championing of oral societies, his text is written down” (Sayre, Performance 207).

3. The title of the talk poem “remembering recording representing” (from talking at the boundaries) comes to mind.


5. James Meyer explores the careers of these six artists in Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties (2001). His account of the development and reception of minimalist art has been important to the present study.


7. Cf. Lippard 58.

8. Perloff does compare Antin’s talk poems to Cage’s verbal performances (Indeterminacy 288–339).

9. For a discussion of the procedural poetics of Cage and Mac Low, see Craig Dworkin’s Reading the Illegible, where he describes a procedural poetics of “writing-through” used by both Mac Low and Cage to reconfigure Ezra Pound’s Cantos (Illegible 88). Dworkin also makes an interesting Wittgensteinian connection: “In Wittgensteinian terms, then, Cage and Mac Low might be seen as reading machines set to different idling speeds” (92).
10. In pointing to differences between Antin and his poetic influences, I do not want to overstate the issue. Antin himself is quick to acknowledge the examples of Cage and Mac Low. For example, “In the first section of my book Meditations—probably drawing inspiration from Jackson Mac Low—I built every line around a word taken alphabetically from a list of words that high school children had trouble spelling” (Antin and Bernstein 35).

11. The argument that Antin should be read as a procedural poet seems to have achieved some degree of critical consensus. Hank Lazer explains that “Antin emphasizes process over product” (Poetries vol. 1, 111) and that his “principal affinity as a poet lies with poesis as process” (Poetries vol. 2, 98). Perloff calls Antin’s talk poetry “a process-oriented art” (Indeterminacy 318). Aji refers to collage as “the procedure at the center” of Antin’s work from the 1960s (“1960s” 90). Antin himself points out that “The poems of Meditations, like Code of Flag Behavior and definitions, looked like poems. They were a procedural poetry that drew on source texts subjected to various operations and organized in verse lines” (Afterword 188). Antin also compares his early process to film production: “I was very committed to the process of composing, working at poems, putting things together and taking them apart like some kind of experimental filmmaker” (Antin and Bernstein 42).

12. For a related take on Antin’s self-reflexivity, see Dworkin’s discussion of Antin’s procedural poem “Separation Meditations.” Using the notes to a translation of Epictetus, Antin fashioned a procedural work that is self-referential in much the same way as “Novel Poem”: “In the new context of Antin’s page… the excerpted lines take on a distinctly self-reflexive aspect, gesturing to their new context rather than to the body text of their original volume” (Dworkin, “Prostheses” 9).

13. For Antin’s full description of the writing of “Novel Poem,” see Selected Poems (15–17).

14. In his book Textual Politics and the Language Poets, George Hartley dedicates an entire chapter to refuting Jameson’s reading of “China” and the new sentence form. For Hartley, Jameson’s use of the Lacanian concept of schizophrenia “leads him to the traditional Marxist denunciation of modernist (and now postmodernist) fragmentation, rather than to an appreciation of Perelman’s particular use of the material signifier as a political critique” (45). Perelman himself has pointed out that “in discussing the parataxis in ‘China,’” Jameson’s “vocabulary registers significant alarm” (63). Yet Jameson’s critique of schizophrenic disjunction is misplaced, Perelman explains, because “What from one perspective may look like a sign of radical disconnection may from another be a gesture of continuity” (64).

15. Hal Foster explains that “the minimalist suppression of anthropomorphic images and gestures is more than a reaction against the abstract-expressionist model of art; it is a ‘death of the author’ (as Roland Barthes would call it in 1968) that is at the same time a birth of the viewer” (50).

16. Dworkin makes a similar point in his reading of Antin’s “Separation Meditations”: “Indeed, when separated from the body of the text and taken by
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itself, even the most earnestly objective and utile system of notes can appear as a paratactic prose poem of ‘new sentences’ that invite alogical connections—sometimes surrealist or absurdist, sometimes simply nonsensical. David Antin’s ‘Separation Meditations,’ which transforms the supplemental clarifications of an editor into evocative and gnomic statements, provides a perfect illustration (Dworkin 8).

17. Cf. George Leonard on Antin’s use of improvisation: “Improvisation, then, is not mere spontaneity or automatic writing. Antin can be said to improvise with materials without having to create all the materials then and there. Combining is also improvising” (111).

18. Aji astutely notes that Antin’s use of “everyday life and everyday language” serves as a challenge to the capitalist reification of art: “Whereas modernists, Pound for instance, protested against capitalism as the intrusion of money and commerce into the field of art, Antin, as a postmodern poet, shows that art can escape this reification precisely by working with it, reifying everyday life and everyday language. Thus the process already started in definitions, which aimed at debunking ready-made phrases, is pursued in his overall action aiming at debunking the act of poetic creation and the status of the poet” (‘Hermeneutics’ 101–102).


4 “A new content”: Procedural Form and Concrete Reality in Ron Silliman’s Tjanting

1. For a related discussion of Silliman’s use of procedural form, see William Watkin’s “‘Systematic Rule-Governed Violations of Convention’: The Poetics of Procedural Constraint in Ron Silliman’s Bart and The Chinese Notebook.” Watkin discusses, among other things, Silliman’s use of “chance, preexisting text / vocabularies, and performativity” (501); his “avant-garde intention of applying procedure to dominant norms so as to destabilize them” (501); and his application of “a procedure designed to make the activity of working on the poem manifest” (518).

2. Of the year 1980, W. Carl Biven writes, “The inflation rate soared to the highest level since the early 1950s. Charles Schultze, [President Jimmy] Carter’s chief economic adviser, reported to the president that the inflation rate in January and February was in the 18 to 20 percent range. Unemployment rose, cresting at just under 8 percent in midsummer and much higher in key industrial areas” (4).

3. For overviews of the origins of the Language movement, see Perelman’s The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History (1996), Ann Vickery’s Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing (2000), and chapter two of Watten’s The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics (2003). Perelman’s Hills and Watten’s This were notable San Francisco-based magazines. Tuumaba and The Figures, edited by Hejinian...
and Geoff Young, respectively, were important presses for the San Francisco Language poets.


5. Although the original “Politics of Poetry” issue does not have page numbers, I have added them for ease of reference. Thus, the title page is page 1, and so on.

6. See Watten, *Syntax* 107 for a discussion of Silliman’s tendency to use “the sentence rather than the word” as a basic compositional unit. Watten also provides a useful discussion of the various source materials that Silliman uses in his work.

7. Silliman discusses Stein’s influence on the new sentence at some length (NS 84–87). George Hartley explains, “The attraction of *Tender Buttons* for poet Ron Silliman lies in Stein’s use of the sentence rather than the line as the unit of composition. The sentences in Stein’s portraits of homely objects are juxtaposed so as to create friction, like the units of perspective are in a Cubist painting” (6).

8. Various critics have described the check upon narrative development caused by the new sentence, as well as the formal and political implications of this check. See e.g., Bernstein, *Dream* 308; Perelman 78; and Watten, *Constructivist* 234.

9. For a discussion of the Saussurean dimension of Stein’s writing, as well as a general summary of the importance of Saussurean linguistics vis-à-vis the Language poets, see Hartley (5, 59–61).

10. This equation can also be read as a meta-poetic statement. As a computer command, \( A = A + 1 \) can be used to generate a numerical series of increasing value; this increase is similar to the Fibonacci structure of *Tjanting*, which I discuss in the next section of this chapter. Also, given the influence that Zukofsky’s work has had on Silliman, one has to wonder if there is a pun lurking in the “\( A + 1 \)” formulation. Perhaps *Tjanting*—as a long poem influenced by Zukofsky’s life poem “A”—might, in a sense, be “\( A \)” + 1.

11. In *Radical Artifice*, Marjorie Perloff provides a brief but helpful account of Silliman’s use of the Fibonacci series as a form (161–162). Benjamin Friedlander discusses the form and its political implications in “Poetics, Polemic, and the Question of Intelligibility” (see especially section 10).

12. Cf. Watkin on Silliman’s “site-specific procedurality wherein the dominance of such agencies as chance and found vocabularies in the field of procedural poetics can be sacrificed if the problem to hand requires different procedural rules” (526–527). Watkin finds in Silliman’s poetry a complex proceduralism that allows for authorial intention: “It is hard, then, to place exactly where Silliman’s procedural works stand, if they are indeed procedural in any easily definable manner. They are not traditionally procedural in that, rejecting chance and vocabularies, they are overtly intentional, yet nor are they examples of an intentional poetics, as clearly this form of poetry is not a means of self-expression or self-making but quite the opposite” (526).
13. Cf. Friedlander: “The poem (Tjanting) is an attempt to show what one particular aesthetic form (the Fibonacci number series) ‘might look like’ as text; the aesthetic form is in turn an attempt to show what one particular political content (class struggle) ‘would . . . look like, viewed as a form’” (section 10).

14. In The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740, Michael McKeon provides a thorough discussion of “the familiar correlation between the rise of the novel and the rise of the middle class” (22).

15. Content—which is derived from “the very components of our concrete social life itself: words, thoughts, objects, desires, people, places, activities” (Jameson, Form 403)—has a formal existence within the literary work; the cultural significance of content will only become completely clear in the light of a dialectical formal criticism, a criticism that deals with content in its own right and as a part of the historically determined formal structure of the work. As Jameson explains, “the first methodological consequence of the dialectical notion of form and content is that, depending on the progress of the interpretive work and the state at which it has arrived, either term can be translated into the other” (Form 403).

16. Hartley’s analysis of realism and the Language poets’ critical relationship to it represents an important moment in the early scholarly reception of Language poetry. I am especially indebted to Hartley’s chapter “Realism and Reification: The Poetics and Politics of Three Language Poets” in his Textual Politics and the Language Poets (53–75). The book has been a valuable guide in the writing of this chapter.

17. Hartley argues that, even in a traditional poetic form like the sonnet, the “conventional organization of material elements” points to “the traces of the social production of language”: “One never loses sight of the gesture behind the object; in Saussurean terms, one never loses sight of the signifier behind the signified; in Marxist terms, one never loses sight of the labor process behind the commodity” (Hartley 63).

18. Hartley defines “the material signifier” as “the significatory unit (whether the phoneme, the word, the phrase, or the sentence) which has been isolated from standard syntactical patterns, drawing attention to itself as much as, or more than, to any concept it may point to” (42).

19. Donald Wellman has identified a direct link between Williams’ and Silliman’s respective poetics of the real. In “A Complex Realism: Reading Spring and All as Seminal for Postmodern Poetry,” Wellman argues that Silliman’s What presents “a reflexive literalism that concerns the very possibility of observation”; like William Carlos Williams’s Spring and All, it functions as “a web of interlaced associations that speak to a complex realism that is very much of the world” (Wellman 315).


21. In “Artifice of Absorption,” Bernstein contrasts the quality of textual “absorption,” which is “engrossing, engulfing completely,” and so on, with “impermeability,” which is, among other things, “unintegrated, fractured, fragmented” (20). I would argue that Tjanting falls on the impermeable side of this dialectic.
yet I also find accurate Fredman’s assertion that the text is “inexhaustibly permeable by an outside reality” (Poet’s Prose 146). In this case, the contradiction is a result of the metaphor itself, which—for all of its suggestiveness—is somewhat imprecise. For Fredman, the text is permeable because it can include anything. Yet to the extent that readymade or borrowed language maintains its former identity, it gives an impermeable quality to the text (in Bernstein’s sense of the word).

22. “Semiology therefore aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification” (Barthes, Semiology 9).

23. The quotation is italicized in its original context.

24. See especially the beginning of the “The Body of the Condemned” in Discipline and Punish (Foucault 3-10).

25. For more on “everyday life” in Tjanting, as well as Tjanting’s use of the new sentence form to represent the quotidian, see Watten, Constructivist 106, 231.

5 Objectivist Form and Feminist Materialism in Lyn Hejinian’s My Life

1. On Hejinian’s formal and procedural constraints, see Perloff, Artifice 162–164; Lazer vol. 2, 29; Monte 218–219.

2. See Fink (no pagination).

3. The title My Life is, in itself, somewhat subversive, in that it calls to mind a number of other eponymously titled autobiographies (by Richard Wagner, Isadora Duncan, Leon Trotsky and Marc Chagall, among others) that function in more traditional narrative modes.

4. On Stein’s influence, especially concerning Hejinian’s notion of realism, see “Two Stein Talks” (Language 83–130). For Hejinian’s treatment of Objectivism and the Objectivist poets Zukofsky and George Oppen, see Language 190, 330–332, 347–351. In the essay “Phenomenal Poetics: Reading Lyn Hejinian,” Peter Nicholls has discussed the connection between Hejinian and the Objectivist poets. He explains that “the second half of the seventies saw the publication of new collections by Zukofsky, Niedecker, Rakosi, Reznikoff and Oppen—whatever ‘objectivism’ had meant in the thirties, these writers’ work was still very much a presence to be reckoned with and much remains to be said about their importance for the Language poets” (Nicholls 245). For Nicholls, Oppen is the Objectivist poet most relevant to Hejinian’s phenomenal poetics and her interest in ethics (245, 251). Although my approach to Hejinian’s work is materialist rather than phenomenological, I have found useful Nicholls’s discussion of metonymy (244), “singularity” (246), “the ‘gap’ between ourselves and things” (247), defamiliarization (247), and “the ‘impenetrability’ of objects” (249).
5. To an extent, Hejinian’s treatment of emotions as objectifiable marks a return to Ezra Pound’s imagist dictum, “Direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective” (Pound, Essays 3). In a sense, then, she is returning to the imagist source of Objectivism and using it in new ways.

6. In practice, however, the distinction between an object-oriented parataxis and a discursive, hierarchical hypotaxis often breaks down. For example, Brian M. Reed has found in Hart Crane’s poetry an “attenuated hypotaxis” that results in neither “a catalog strung together by conjunctions” nor a coherent grammar of subordination; Reed also finds examples of this attenuated hypotaxis in several postmodern poets, including Hejinian (“Victrola” 117).

7. The particularity of objects has a special connection to realist writing, in that, as Hejinian puts it, “Things are real separately” (ML 157). Thus, the tree tunnel corresponds to Roland Barthes’s notion of a “reality effect,” the “useless detail” (Language 143), the instance of “concrete reality” (146) that “becomes the very signifier of realism” (148). Realism, then, like Objectivism, is in the details. Though Hejinian’s most extensive treatment of realism (“Two Stein Talks”) takes Stein’s writing as a primary exemplar, Zukofsky’s object-oriented particularity could also serve as a foundational model for a poetics of realist description.

8. Carla Harryman’s description of rule-based procedural writing is apropos here, in that it echoes Hejinian’s understanding of form: “In my use of it, the rule is the rule of thought, not of literary convention. This rule of thought is the convention on which the experimental work relies and what the experimental work cannot question without destroying itself. This rule of thought or intellectual position is then what allows the difficult text to come into being at all, and it is what limits its own complexity” (117).

9. Perloff refers to the fragment “a pause, a rose something on paper” as a “leitmotif” that “goes through endless permutations, appearing each time in a new context” (Dance 223–224). Dworkin explains that “The disorienting element of Hejinian’s rhythmic writing and its blatant ‘rejection of closure’ arises from the ainline arrangement of its sentences and phrases in a strict parataxis set against the tension of occasional intimations of hypotactic motivation and the syncopation of repeated and slightly varied ‘leitmotif’ phrases. My Life, that is to say, disrupts conventions of writing by manipulating the relation of syntactic units, rather than by disrupting syntax itself or by dislocating text at the level of the page” (“Penelope” 59). Stephen Fredman notes that “Single sentences in the book are not just statements or propositions or commands or interjections; they also gain and change meaning by their placement among other nearby sentences, by their relationships to other sentences within a chapter, and by being repeated and permuted throughout the book” (“Inquiry” 66). Moreover, “As one reads and rereads My Life, the relationship of figure to ground remains in flux, causing sentences to emerge and recede with respect to other sentences around them. This perceptual flux mimes an epistemological flux, in which words and phrases act as both ‘subjects’ and ‘objects,’ as both referential and material signifiers” (Fredman 66). On the difference between Hejinian’s use of
the sentence and Ron Silliman’s, see Perelman 71. On Hejinian’s “jump-cutting between sentences,” see Bernstein 284–285. On the antithesis between the repetition of “key phrases, such as the beginning ‘a pause, a rose, something on paper’” and “autobiography’s linear progress,” see Spahr 68. For Hejinian’s own interpretation of repetition within My Life, see Inquiry 44.

10. See Spahr’s Everybody’s Autonomy for a discussion of My Life in terms of readerly praxis.

11. Hejinian has “the famous madeleine scene” in mind when she cites Proust as an influence (Inquiry 185). She notes that “Proust’s style of accretion, of accumulation, meditation, and release (release into consciousness and as such into the book) was and is inspiring to me” (185). She goes on to quote a translated section of the madeleine passage.

12. Cf. Christopher Beach’s discussion of the doll imagery and of gender (70–71).


14. According to Brown, “the doubleness of the commodity (its use value and exchange value) might be said to conceal a more fundamental difference, between the object and itself, or the object and the thing, on which the success of the commodity, the success of capitalism, depends. Put differently: value derives from the appropriation of a pre-existing surplus, the material object’s own excessiveness” (Sense 13–14). But Brown’s critique does not remain neatly within a Marxist framework. He is willing “to sacrifice the clarity of thinking about things as objects of consumption, on the one hand, in order to see how, on the other, our relation to things cannot be explained by the cultural logic of capitalism” (Sense 5–6).

15. My reading of Woolf’s “Solid Objects” is informed by Brown’s. I am particularly indebted to his discussion of the role of objects, things, and materiality in the story.

16. See Juliana Spahr’s entry on Hejinian in the Dictionary of Literary Biography (Spahr 103).

17. Cf. Brown on “thingness,” which “amounts to a latency…and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects)” (“Thing Theory” 5).
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