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Culture and Humor in Postwar American Poetry

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This book is dedicated to my family.

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Introduction

The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.

—Walt Whitman

Something we were withholding made us weak
Until we found out that it was ourselves
We were withholding from our land of living

—Robert Frost

What counted was mythology of the self,
Blotched out beyond unblotching.

—Wallace Stevens

Where are you, Walt?
The Open Road goes to the used-car lot.

—Louis Simpson

It occurs to me that I am America.
I am talking to myself again.

—Allen Ginsberg

Summer in the trees! "It is time to strangle several bad poets."

—Kenneth Koch

It has always been a challenge, for the critic, to find their way in the enormous diversity of trends that affect the choice of subject matter, tone, form, and language in American poetry at any given point in time. For Peter Stitt, the state of recent American poetry is "an age of muchness," uncertainty, and a plenitude of authorial options, styles, and interpretations. There seems no simple way to make sense of "so many writers and poets, so much art, so much poetry, so much contemporary poetry."[1] The task of the scholar is not, however, futile. Stephen Burt points out that even when trying to find a compass to the very new American poets whose work betrays every possible stylistic influence of the recent and distant past, some traditional approaches and expectations in relation to their poetry may be usable, as the best of contemporary American poetry still "lets us imagine that certain arrangements of words, and nothing else—no camera, no lights, not much action—can tell us what it's like to be other people, and (in another sense) what it's like to be ourselves."[2] In other words, the rhetorical effect of great past and recent American poetry upon the reader and the ability of the poem to communicate its content and persuade the reader/listener to share the vision of the world as presented in the poem has been acknowledged by critics who have otherwise chosen the formalist analysis of form and content over analyzing the rhetorical effect of the poem as a visionary manifestation of the poet's consciousness that is to be shared by the reader. As William Logan acknowledges, a good poem "works like God—in mysterious ways,"[3] forcing the critic to serve the poem and not just apply a rational apparatus to it as an end in itself. A poem, C.K. Williams argues, "is composed of sensation, of image, language, a voice, perception, bodily reference, sentiment, morality, thought,

1 Peter Stitt, *Uncertainty and Plenitude: Five Contemporary Poets* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 1.

2 Stephen Burt, *Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2009), 19.

3 William Logan, "Against Aesthetics," *New Criterion* 32, no. 1 (2013): 20.

and experience."[4] The form of the poem is arbitrary in relation to its content and the resulting rhetorical effect of the poem, which Williams calls "the music of poetry," is conditioned by "the tension between the artificially determined conventions and the necessities of language and experience."[5]

Peter Swirski emphasizes the fact that any hierarchical classification of literary genres based on the elite (or highbrow) vs. popular (or lowbrow) status within culture breeds unwanted evaluation of literary excellence: "Popular equals bad because if it were any good it would not be popular in the first place; and popular equals generic equals bad because it appeals to so many by virtue of being simplistic, schematic, and repetitive."[6] Yet American poets such as Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg successfully courted both the popular and highbrow audiences for their writings and saw no reason to reject one or the other.

There is more to the ways in which a poem affects its audience than calling it a mere manifestation of private content through poetic language cast in a particular form. T.S. Eliot claims that the social obligation of the poet towards their audience does not exist in a causal relationship as the poet's duty is not directly to the audience, but, rather, "to his language, first to preserve, and second to extend and improve."[7] Ultimately, Eliot argues, the social function of poetry lies in its public resonance, in the ability "to affect the speech and the sensibility of the whole nation."[8] Walter Kalaidjian develops Eliot's claim when he notes that American poetry should also be seen from a two-directional socio-aesthetic perspective as

4 C.K. Williams, *Poetry and Consciousness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 8.

5 Williams, *Poetry and Consciousness*, 9.

6 Peter Swirski, *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 29.

7 T.S. Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry," in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Noonday, 1957), 9.

8 Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry," 12.

> at once shaped by and resisting the broader discursive forces that make up our historical moment. On the one hand, poetic language enjoys only a relative autonomy from the textual and institutional networks that mediate lyric expression. On the other hand, an author's poetic forms and a poetic text's linguistic techniques exist in a critical relationship to other literary and cultural discourses.[9]

Joseph Harrington similarly argues that American poetry has been an unrecognized public medium of literary and cultural discourse as its ability "to effect equilibrium and ordering, to preserve or transmit aesthetic and ethical values, and to (de)sacralize twentieth-century capitalist society have made it a perennial battleground in the struggle to define the subject of national culture."[10] Ultimately, in the best of American lyric poetry, from Walt Whitman to the present, the subjective content of the poet's utterance assumes collective, public meaning and relevance when the utterance is interpreted by the reader/listener.[11] Theodor W. Adorno explains that this transfer of meaning is paradoxical and yet natural to poetry as its "subjectivity turns into objectivity" of content and the subject of the poem, "with no remaining trace of mere matter, sounds forth in language until language itself acquires a voice."[12] The voice in poetry, then, is no longer the private property of the poet. Astrid Franke argues that "the assumption of poetry's public role is an important and

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9 Walter Kalaidjian, *Languages of Liberation: The Social Text in Contemporary American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 31–32.

10 Joseph Harrington, *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 167–68.

11 By using the reader/listener dichotomy one wishes to call attention to the poem as public performance of the poet's voice as opposed to the private effect of the poem when it is just read.

12 Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedeman, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 43.

pervasive aspect throughout the history of American poetry."[13] Individual poets, from Phillis Wheatley to the 9/11 poets of the 2000s, have understood the public role of poetry as a challenge that demands that the poet practice a combination of "aesthetic innovation and public commitment" in their attempt to write poetry that has public resonance.[14]

This book tries to interpret the poetry produced by several important American poets who chose American culture from the 1950s to the 2000s as their subject matter. Robert von Hallberg defines culture poetry as that which "engages as well the feelings, experiences, and difficulties that are considered the irreducible center of public life."[15] Such poetry navigates between the portrayal of the private joys and woes of the poet as an individual and the public effect of these feelings when they are shared with his or her audience through the medium of poetry. Consequently, the public sphere and its effect upon the poet's work has been a dominant thematic focus in the work of the American poets chosen for analysis, which makes their reputation rest as much on their culture poems as on their introspective poems that explore the act of writing about culture and the self. The poets whose work is analyzed at length include Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Koch, Mark Halliday, R.S. Gwynn, Tony Hoagland, Campbell McGrath, Billy Collins, and three contemporary Chinese-American poets—Cathy Song, Marilyn Chin, and Li-Young Lee.[16]

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13 Astrid Franke, *Pursue the Illusion: Problems of Public Poetry in America* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2010), 4.

14 Franke, *Pursue the Illusion*, 5.

15 Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945–1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 4. For a less positive view of culture poetry that relates it to the realm of didactic explanation of culture and not an end in itself like real poetry, see Karl Shapiro, *In Defense of Ignorance* (New York, Random, 1960), 22.

16 While the inclusion of this chapter may seem odd, given the choice of white male poets in the other chapters, the work of all three poets (i.e., Cathy Song, Li-Young Lee, and Marilyn Chin) addresses similar themes of culture and identity, with

My method of analysis in this book is primarily that of rhetorical criticism, that is, approaching the poems with what Edward P.J. Corbett views as "the interactions between the work, the author, and the audience."[17] The aim of rhetorical criticism as applied to poetry is, consequently, to regard each poem (and, to a degree, each poet) under review "not so much as an object of aesthetic contemplation but as an artistically structured instrument for communication."[18] When the ideological framework of rhetorical criticism is translated into practical poetry analysis terms, as Stanley Plumly reminds us, "the test of a good poem has come down to the relative believability or authenticity of its voice, its rhetoric," and, especially in postwar American lyric poetry, the question of voice and its credibility becomes paramount as "the point of view is always limited, someone is always speaking."[19] The American poem as private speech made public will be another persistent concern of this study.

Beyond the analysis of the rhetorical impact of poetry by Ginsberg and others, formal elements of their work will also be considered as the rhetorical analysis does not preclude parallel application of close reading in the formalist/New Critical tradition.[20] M.L. Rosenthal argued that the objective approach to the analysis of poetry even applied to the postwar poets who turned toward open form as "poetry can be understood one poem at a time only. There is no short cut, and love and respect as well as rigor are needed if one is to come to terms with that one poem."[21]

the added theme of growing up ethnic and trying to negotiate one's attitude to mainstream American culture.

17 Edward P.J. Corbett, introduction to *Rhetorical Analyses of Literary Works*, ed. Edward P.J. Corbett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), xxii.

18 Corbett, "Introduction," xxii.

19 Stanley Plumly, *Argument and Song: Sources and Silences in Poetry* (New York: Handsel Books, 2003), 165.

20 See Wilfred L. Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 283.

21 M.L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 4–5.

As William Logan explains, although the close reading approach to poetry had, by the 1960s, grown "tired of itself, its legacy lies in the craft [of the poets] revealed and the clarity [of the poems] gained."[22] Moreover, even if by the 1970s new critical approaches to literature, such as post-structuralism and deconstruction, had been widely embraced, the practice of close reading of the poem as a self-enclosed aesthetic artifact remained central to much poetry criticism even beyond the 1970s as American poetry in the second half of the twentieth century was, for all the inherent radical ideological impulses that it incorporated in the 1950s and 1960s, still written using conventions as regards the use of content, form, and language that render it "more susceptible to New Critical readings than to any criticism that has followed."[23] This is not to say, however, that the role of the poet and their poetry within the public sphere of postwar America was marginal. Poets responded sensitively to the postwar developments in American culture, although by the 1950s they found it increasingly hard to find a credible voice in which to speak about the atmosphere of consumerism, conservatism, and persecution of difference in the workplace, politics, society, the arts, and literature. William H. Chafe explains that many American writers after the Second World War came to feel so alienated from the mainstream culture and society that they would repeatedly explore the theme of "the individual against the system—how to find freedom in a world where every move fits into someone else's plan, and the individual, even under the illusion of acting independently, ultimately exerts no control over his own destiny."[24] There were several stylistic and ideological responses by American poets to this

22 William Logan, "Forward into the Past: Reading the New Critics," in *Praising It New: The Best of New Criticism,* ed. Garrick Davis (Athens: Swallow Press / Ohio University Press, 2008), xv.

23 Logan, "Forward into the Past: Reading the New Critics," xv.

24 William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 127.

situation. The academic formalists who started publishing in the late 1940s (Richard Wilbur, Howard Nemerov, Anthony Hecht, James Merrill, Donald Justice, John Hollander, and the young Robert Lowell before his groundbreaking *Life Studies*) chose to work within the intellectual tradition of the Modernists, producing intelligent, demanding, allusive, impersonal, meditative poems that relied heavily on irony, satire, and traditional forms, meter, and rhyme. Others, for example Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, the Beat poets, the San Francisco poets, and the New York poets, chose to develop writing in "open" forms that strove to provide an alternative to the academic formalist dictum of the mid-century.[25] Third, there was a large group of American poets, mostly born in the 1920s, whose early careers span the late 1940s and early 1950s, who abandoned their early formalism in favor of more open forms and a personal tone. The third group of accomplished formalist poets who later came to embrace open forms and tonal approaches that would enable them to convey new themes and content (confessionalism, taboo subject matter, feminism, madness, sexuality, perversion, and so forth) includes Adrienne Rich, Philip Levine, Anne Sexton, James Wright, and Donald Hall.

Regardless of which stylistic roads were taken by American poets after the Second World War, whether they chose to celebrate the public identity or private self, working in open or closed form, Walter Kalaidjian argues that their poetry lost its former national appeal as it "found itself increasingly driven to the obscure and eccentric margins of cultural life."[26] The present study will examine the public dimension of this poetry while analyzing

[25] The "open" versus "closed" form poets are best compared if one juxtaposes two important anthologies of American poetry: first, Donald Hall's *New Poets of England and America* (1957), which privileged traditional formal poetry, and second, Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (1960), which introduced an excellent range of poems in the open form poetics of Olson and the Black Mountain, Beat, and San Francisco poets to a wide audience.

[26] Kalaidjian, *Languages of Liberation*, 9–10.

the parallel development of its marginalization within postwar American society and its consumerism. The first chapter deals with the history and present of the debate on American poetry and its public perception. From Edmund Wilson to Mike Chasar, American critics have pondered the problem of the social status of poetry as an art genre and the ways in which the literary world and the general audience have perceived poetry. The second chapter provides a working typology of humor in American poetry. The subsequent chapters then provide comprehensive rhetorical and thematic criticism of each poet's work, with a special focus on the role of culture and humor.

Crisis or Not: On the Situation of American Poetry and Its Audience

Critics and poets have claimed that the situation of American poetry within American literature, literary scholarship, and within the national culture is not very promising. Especially the decline in the audience for literature and poetry in particular has been noted repeatedly. While this complaint is mostly a matter of the twentieth century, especially dating back to the era of Modernism and after, Stephen Fredman explains that American poetry has, strictly speaking, "always been in crisis, always called upon to make necessary existential decisions."[1] Fredman thus uses the concept of crisis in American poetry as a constructive, dynamic situation that harbors the potential for formal and thematic innovation. Many other critics have chosen, however, to see American poetry as a patient in critical condition, as a literary genre that was, for much of the last century, becoming increasingly marginalized and irrelevant as a medium for public and literary discourse. "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" wondered fiction critic Edmund Wilson in 1934. He was so convinced that poetry, especially American poetry, was on the way out by the early 1930s that he dismissed the cultural importance of lyric poetry in the wake of the Romantics and called it an aberration, a mistake which had caused poetry since the late eighteenth century to degenerate into the single-track lyric meditative style that forced many ambitious writers to leave poetry as "the literary technique of verse was once made to serve many purposes for which we now, as a rule, use prose."[2] The great tradition of epic and dramatic poetry was dead by the end of the eighteenth century and future

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1 Stephen Fredman, *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4.

2 Edmund Wilson, "Is Verse a Dying Technique?," in *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1930s & 40s*, ed. Lewis M. Dabney (New York: Library of America, 2007), 19.

writers of the caliber of Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare would choose prose for their great writings, not poetry.[3] Wilson claimed that since the time of Coleridge, Poe, and subsequently through the influence of American Modernists such as Pound, Eliot, and Sandburg, in lyric poetry, "the techniques of prose and verse have been getting mixed up at a bewildering rate—with the prose technique steadily gaining."[4] Several years after Wilson, Delmore Schwartz joined in with his own criticism, which rejected the Romantic and modernist reduction of poetry to the purely lyric. For Schwartz, the problem of modern poetry after Baudelaire (which includes the contribution of American modernists such as Eliot, Pound, and Stevens, who were all influenced by the earlier modernization of French poetry in the late nineteenth century) lies in the isolation and obscurity of the modern poet and his or her poetry. Schwartz explains that "the modern poet has been very much affected by the condition and the circumstance that he has been separated from the whole life of society."[5] William Blake and Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge chose to turn towards Nature and away from the increasingly alien and mechanistic society and culture. Their movement was realized through the newly appropriated medium of introspective lyric poetry, vocalizing "their painful sense that the poet no longer belonged to the society into which he was born, and for which, presumably, he was writing his verse."[6] The retreat of the lyric poets from the public sphere for much of the nineteenth century was a natural reaction to the "intuitive recognition on the part of both the artist and the rest of the population that culture and sensibility—and thus the works by means of which they sustained

3 See Wilson, "Is Verse a Dying Technique?," 22.

4 Wilson, "Is Verse a Dying Technique?," 29.

5 Delmore Schwartz, "The Isolation of Modern Poetry," in *Praising It New: The Best of The New Criticism*, ed. Garrick Davis (Athens: Swallow Press / Ohio University Press, 2008), 153.

6 Schwartz, "The Isolation of Modern Poetry," 154.

their existence—did not belong, did not fit into the essential workings of society."[7] Ultimately, the withdrawal of the modern poets into a private cultivation of their own sensibility through the medium of lyric poetry meant, despite the Wordsworthian efforts to bring the language of poetry closer to spoken language, that "the idiom of poetic style and the normal thought and speech of the community have been moving in opposite directions and have had little or no relationship to each other."[8] Although Schwartz sees the isolation and obscurity of modern poets and their lyric work as a mostly negative development, there is one positive effect that he mentions. While "the enforced isolation of the poet has made dramatic and narrative poetry almost impossible, it has, on the other hand, increased the uses and powers of languages in the most amazing and the most valuable directions."[9] The modern poetry thus increased the poet's marginalization and yet placed an admirable emphasis on linguistic innovation, which, at its core, is crucial to all great poetry. In a 1945 essay, Randall Jarrell proclaimed, somewhat polemically, that modernist poetry in American and Britain was dead, that it had reached its "end of the line."[10] Furthermore, Jarrell detailed the many ways in which American modernism was a direct extension of European and British Romanticism—from the modernist preoccupation with experimentation, obscurity, and difficulty to the conscious removal of the poet from daily life, culture, and society.[11] What remains most interesting about Jarrell's critique of Modernism is his final claim that the proponents of the movement, besides being highly Romantic in their iconoclastic attitudes toward culture and society, also followed "the excesses of late-capitalist

7 Schwartz, "The Isolation of Modern Poetry," 156.
8 Schwartz, "The Isolation of Modern Poetry," 158.
9 Schwartz, "The Isolation of Modern Poetry," 159–60.
10 Randall Jarrell, "The End of the Line," in *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology 1900–2000*, ed. Jon Cook (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 273.
11 See Jarrell, "The End of the Line," 272–73.

society," which they thought themselves to be rebelling against. Jarrell argues that the generation of Eliot and Pound preached a radical break with Romanticism and capitalist society while being the principal explorers of both: "How much the modernist poets disliked their society, and how much they resembled it! How often they contradicted its letter and duplicated its spirit!"[12] Ultimately, for Jarrell, the two most readily available modes for the American poet to pursue by the 1940s are either "a fairly heartless eclecticism or a fairly solitary individuality."[13] In the following chapters, it will be shown that the postwar American poets readily adopted a mixture of both approaches toward poetry and culture—eclectic inclusion and Romantic retreat from the supposed evils of postwar consumerist society into an exploration of the self.

A seminal postwar poetic manifesto which addresses the problem of form and content in poetry is Charles Olson's "Projective Verse." First published in 1950, it attempts to develop the modernist liberation of fixed form poetry pioneered by Pound and Williams by emphasizing "composition by field," which means radical rejection of mechanistic formalism and an embrace of the syllable, line, and breath as essential structuring agents of the new American poetry. Olson further argued that after the Second World War, the time was ripe "for us to bring into being an open verse as formal as the closed, with all its traditional advantages."[14] In different ways, many 1950s poets in America, from the Beats to the Black Mountain and San Francisco Poets, did choose to follow Olson's call for poetic action and started writing in open form.

In "The Obscurity of the Poet," Jarrell revisits his earlier polemic about the decline of American poetry after modernism and explains that the argument about the increased isolation and

12 Jarrell, "The End of the Line," 274.

13 Jarrell, "The End of the Line," 273.

14 Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology 1900–2000*, ed. Jon Cook (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 293.

irrelevance of poetry in America in the middle of the twentieth century is misguided since postwar Americans are deemed non-literary folk who just "don't read poetry" at all and "most of them wouldn't understand it if they did."[15] He further argues that the twentieth-century decline in the size of the audience for poetry in America has nothing to do with the modernist emphasis on difficulty in poetry since: "If we were in the habit of reading poets their obscurity would not matter; and, once we are out of the habit, their clarity does not help."[16] That is, he argues that the size of the audience for poetry in America has nothing to do with the formal and/or thematic difficulty (or accessibility, for that matter) of the poetry itself. Jarrell thus takes the debate about the marginalization of poetry away from the half-baked attacks on it by proponents of prose (e.g., Wilson) and relates this development to the growth of postwar popular culture in America, which no longer reserved a prominent spot for the widespread consumption and appreciation of traditional art genres such as poetry: "One of our [American] universities recently made a survey of the reading habits of the American public; it decided that forty-eight percent of all Americans read, during a year, no book at all."[17] Jarrell explains that "any American poet under a certain age … has inherited a situation in which no one looks at him and in which, consequently, everyone complains that he is invisible."[18] The decline in the audience for American poetry in the twentieth century is thus to be seen as part of a general decline in the audience for all literary genres, including fiction and drama, and for all "highbrow" art such as opera, ballet, painting, sculpture, and classical music. Jarrell explains that the modern American poet "lives in a world whose newspapers and magazines and books and motion

15 Randall Jarrell, "The Obscurity of the Poet," in *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Vintage, 1959), 3.

16 Jarrell, "The Obscurity of the Poet," 4.

17 Jarrell, "The Obscurity of the Poet," 16.

18 Jarrell, "The Obscurity of the Poet," 9.

pictures and radio stations and television stations have destroyed, in a great many people, even the capacity for understanding real poetry, real art of any kind."[19] The postwar growth of American popular culture brings the debate about the marginalization of poetry down to the question of what Herbert J. Gans claims has been part of the traditional dispute about the value of highbrow vs. lowbrow taste in art and culture, "whether the cultural life of a country should be run by a cultured elite or whether it should be largely determined by the 'market.'"[20] Jarrell finally calls poetry "an indispensable part of any culture we know anything about. Human life without some form of poetry is not human life but animal existence."[21] For all the negative evaluation of the sorry state of poetry in America, he upholds an irrational belief in the didactic and redemptive value of poetry as a deeply human art genre.

After the 1960s, a decade of tumultuous change in American society and the arts, the laments about the decline of American poetry again became more vocal. In 1975, Wendell Berry elaborated on the earlier statements by Wilson and Schwartz and updated them to fit the situation of American poetry in the 1970s. He argued that poetry "remains a specialized art, its range and influence so constricted that poets have very nearly become their own audience."[22] Documenting the introspective turn in the poetry of the 1960s and 1970s through examples of published interviews with American poets including Louis Simpson, Mark Strand, and Philip Levine, Berry concluded that for these (as well as many other) postwar American poets, America only became understood through the narcissistic vision of the self whereby the "world that

19 Jarrell, "The Obscurity of the Poet," 17.

20 Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 4.

21 Jarrell, "The Obscurity of the Poet," 22.

22 Berry, "The Specialization of Poetry," *Review* 28, no.1 (1975): 12.

was once mirrored by the poet, has become the poet's mirror."[23] This postwar turning towards exploration of the self in American poetry brought another negative trend, unrelated to the rise of poetic narcissism and yet equally important for the development of the genre—a turning away from literary tradition that was evident in the rejection of formal poetry by mainstream American poets in the 1970s. Berry reminds, however, that in poetry, the formlessness that came to dominate American poetry in the wake of the success of confessional poets of the 1960s such as Lowell, Plath, Sexton, and Berryman, is not natural and breeds chaos and misuse of power by the poets themselves:

> There is much that we [American poets] need that we cannot get from our contemporaries … they cannot give us the sense of the longevity of human experience, of *proven* possibility, that we get from older writing. Our past is not merely something to depart from; it is to commune with, to speak with.[24]

While the confessional poets' extreme concern with the exploration of the wounded self in poetry may have been a welcome thematic innovation in the late 1950s, the subsequent repudiation of literary and art traditions by the younger poets who focused on self-centered prose poetry in the 1970s and after is an erroneous approach to poetry and writing: "The past is our definition. We may strive, with good reason, to escape from it, but we will escape it only by adding something better to it."[25] For Berry, the confessional poets and their "self-exploiting autobiography of disconnected sensibility" is a dead end.[26] Ultimately, confessional poetry and the poetry of protest bred a private poetry that became

23 Berry, "The Specialization of Poetry," 15.
24 Berry, "The Specialization of Poetry," 20.
25 Berry, "The Specialization of Poetry," 20–21.
26 Berry, "The Specialization of Poetry," 23.

disengaged from the public sphere. Berry's main complaint about this mode was exactly this dissociation of confessional poetry from the rhetorical obligations of the literary genre towards the audience. Having established "a grievous division between life and work," the confessional poets were to again rely on the discarded tradition of metrical and narrative poetry in an attempt to bring the genre back to public relevance.[27]

The debate about the decline of American poetry and its cultural status went on even after Berry's polemical apology for narrative and rhymed poetry. Christopher Clausen was another critic who broadened the analysis to include not just the inherent difficulty, obscurity, and self-centeredness of the modernists, but also the concurrent rise of popular culture and media influence that marked a gradual decline in the size of the audience for all serious art, not just poetry. Clausen calls for the "recovery of the balance between thought, feeling, and form, and a less introverted sense of subjects and purposes."[28] Arguably, this is the main thing that has gone wrong in poetry since the Romantic turn away from the public sphere. Yet there were also other segments of society that influenced the decision of post-Romantic poets to retreat into themselves. Clausen explains that while the modernists such as Pound and Eliot "were laboriously engaged in purifying the dialect of the tribe, that dialect was being increasingly corrupted by the manipulative usages of advertising and politics."[29] Indeed, the corruption of the literary language by the media and politics meant that by the late 1950s, American poets increasingly turned inward, again copying the Romantic retreat into the exploration of a private self, in order to cope with the corruption and vulgarity of official discourse that increasingly barred "serious" poetry

27 Berry, "The Specialization of Poetry," 27.

28 Christopher Clausen, "Poetry in a Discouraging Time," *Georgia Review* 35, no. 4 (1981): 714.

29 Clausen, "The Decline of Anglo-American Poetry," *Virgina Quarterly Review* 54, no. 1 (1978): 75.

from any sort of relevance. As S.I. Hayakawa observed, "poetic language is used so constantly and relentlessly for the purposes of salesmanship that it has become almost impossible to say anything with enthusiasm and joy or conviction without running into the danger of sounding as if you were selling something."[30] As the language of popular culture, media, and advertising entered the language of poetry, the result need not be considered as corruption of the poetic discourse. Mike Chasar recently argued that a rich, all-but-forgotten tradition of popular poetry has always been widely published in American newspapers, popular magazines, greeting cards, and advertisements at the same time as the modernist marginalization of the genre.[31] The corruption of poetic language, or, rather, its infiltration by the language of popular culture, the media, and advertising that was emphasized by Hayakawa, thus need not be viewed as detrimental to poetry, but as its enrichment. As Chasar documents, by mid-century American poetry had struggled with the influence of advertising language, such as the omnipresent groups of rhymed billboard signs which became an integral part of the national consciousness.[32] Moreover, Chasar explains that the reports about the death of poetry by critics such as Wilson and Clausen are exaggerated since there is an unmapped tradition of popular verse to be found in the print media outside the realm of academic canons, anthologies, and critical studies.[33]

Clausen's claims about the decline of Anglo-American poetry in the twentieth century were taken up later by two more polemicists. First, Joseph Epstein revived Wilson's negative assessment of poetry as a dying literary genre when he published his biting take

30 Quoted in Clausen, "The Decline of Anglo-American Poetry," 75.

31 See Mike Chasar, *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

32 See Mike Chasar, "The Business of Rhyming," in *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 123–54.

33 See Chasar, *Everyday Reading*, 6.

on the matter, "Who Killed Poetry?" in 1988.[34] Epstein claimed that by the 1980s, American poetry was only flourishing in "the vacuum" of the MFA writing programs and through the production of a sheltered and subsidized string of academic presses, journals, and magazines, all of which had no reach to the world outside the MFA writing programs.[35] Following the claims by Berry and Clausen, Epstein complains about the post-Romantic preference of poets for the lyric to the exclusion of narrative and dramatic verse, a trend by which "contemporary poetry has seriously delimited itself." Epstein's negative assessment of the 1980s situation in American poetry closes with the naming of the three major problems—first, the loss of poetry's contact with the real world that was started by the modernists and finished by the inward turning of the confessionals, second, the proliferation of mediocre poetry in the postwar writing programs at American universities, and third, a decline in critical standards to measure the flood of this poetry with.[36]

In an early 1990s take on this issue, "Can Poetry Matter?", Dana Gioia develops the critique of American poetry by Wilson, Clausen, and Epstein. He, too, claims that in the second half of the twentieth century, "as American poetry's specialist audience has steadily expanded, its general readership has declined."[37] Gioia identifies the survival of American poetry as being in the hands of a poetry subculture of university writing programs and associated publications. He closes his indictment of American poetry with a proposal for several strategies to improve the situation, hoping to help the poets and poetry teachers' university administrators in their effort to bring the art of poetry back to the reach of the

34 Joseph Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?," *Commentary* 86, no. 2 (1988): 13–20.

35 See Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?," 14–15.

36 See Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?," 20.

37 Dana Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?," in *Can Poetry Matter?: Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2002), 2.

general public.[38] Written in a pre-Internet age, some of the suggestions by Gioia, which include the call for poets and scholars to use the radio more and to improve the quality of poetry reviewing, seem naive or downright unusable, yet his proposal proved an important early 1990s summary of the main problems that existed in American poetry and that affected its audience. Yet there are notable detractors of the Wilson-Gioia train of dismissals. As Donald Hall explains, the problem with the diminished status of poetry may really be "not with poetry but with the public perception of poetry."[39] Hall argues that there is more poetry being written and published in American now than ever before, and yet he agrees with Gioia's lament about the decline of serious reviewing of poetry: "In the past, men and women like Conrad Aiken, Malcolm Cowley, and Louise Bogan practiced literary journalism to make a living. Their successors now meet classes MWF. People with tenure don't need to write book reviews."[40] The postwar professionalization of American poets and their movement from nonacademic positions to university teaching and editorial jobs is also noted by Gioia, who explains that in the American poetry subculture of the university writing programs, poetry criticism is largely positive since it exists "not to provide a disinterested perspective on new books [of poetry] but to publicize them."[41] When poetry criticism and reviewing no longer evaluates the new writing seriously, "the poetry subculture demeans its own art" by fostering a decline of artistic standards in poetry.[42]

Perhaps the most persuasive objection to the Gioia essay and its call for a return to formal and narrative poetry as a panacea to all the problems of American poetry at the end of the

38 See Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?," 19–20.

39 Donald Hall, "Death to the Death of Poetry," in *Breakfast Served Any Time All Day: Essays on Poetry New and Selected* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 13.

40 Hall, "Death to the Death of Poetry," 13.

41 Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?," 6.

42 See Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?," 7.

twentieth century is given by David Bergman, who explains that "the problem with an audience for poetry in the U.S. is much more profound than university employment; it stems from deeply held cultural views about reading and language."[43] In the post-war domination of popular culture and its media, poetry logically became a losing player in the struggle for the general audience's attention. Gioia and the New Formalists or Expansivists claimed that they were able to win back a larger nonacademic audience for poetry. There is, however, no easy way of winning a larger audience for quality fiction, drama, and art genres whose authors and critics, too, have, like poets and poetry critics, been sequestered in American academe for decades. In a symposium response to Clausen's 1981 indictment of American poetry, "Poetry in a Discouraging Time," Wayne C. Booth wondered whether the decline of Anglo-American poetry was not also the story of other literary genres: "Is not serious fiction rapidly going the way of lyric poetry? Indeed, isn't every genre that exhibits devices and effects that cannot be called scientific or logical increasingly considered irrelevant to our world?"[44] Bergman further explains that Gioia's proposals for bringing poetry back to a large audience may not really improve the quality of American poetry itself since to gain a larger audience for poetry "and writing great poems are not necessarily compatible ends."[45] That is, the artistic quality of poetry does not really depend on the number of the practitioners or the size and erudition of their audience. It seems fair to turn again to Donald Hall, a major editor, anthologist, and poet of the last sixty years, who claimed, in the mid-1990s, that the situation was not all that critical: "I believe in the quality of the best contemporary poetry; I believe that the best American poetry of our day makes a

43 David Bergman, "Marketing Poetry," *Kenyon Review* 22, nos. 3–4 (2000): 217.

44 Wayne C. Booth, "Becoming Dangerous Again," *Georgia Review* 35, no. 4 (1981): 753.

45 Bergman, "Marketing Poetry," 222.

considerable literature."[46] In this perspective, the polemic of Gioia seems more of a clever marketing strategy for a particular poetic style (i.e., formalism) than an impartial assessment of the situation of American poetry.[47] And yet the marginalization of American poetry has been a repeated story in American literary scholarship as well. Joseph Harrington documents that the reductionist view of poetry as a literary genre of little socio-cultural relevance was widely shared and promoted by postwar literary scholars, with the result that literature became synonymous with "American fiction *as* American literature,"[48] which leaves out poetry from serious historical grounding of the field of literary history and criticism.

John Barr, a former president of the Chicago-based Poetry Foundation, argued in 2006 that the loss of a large general audience for poetry was also caused by the thematic and stylistic monotony of recent poets' work: "American poetry is ready for something new because our poets have been writing in the same way for a long time now."[49] Bringing up examples of great poetic innovation that happened at the beginning of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Barr claimed that the beginning of the twenty-first century was another time ripe for radical change: "Contemporary poetry's striking absence from the public dialogues of our day, from the high school classroom, from bookstores, and from mainstream media, is evidence of a people in whose mind poetry is missing and unmissed."[50] While Barr's observation is correct, he seems to ignore, like Gioia, the fact that American poetry, like other traditional "highbrow" art genres,

46 Hall, "Death to the Death of Poetry," 12.

47 Ironically, Gioia's earlier criticism, which focuses on the promotion of New Formalism and anti-academic poetry, proved a temporary strategy as he, too, was content to take an establishment position as the NEA chairman in the 2000s and, still later, an endowed chair at The University of Southern California.

48 Harrington, *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 159.

49 John Barr, "American Poetry in the New Century," *Poetry* 188, no. 5 (2006): 433.

50 Barr, "American Poetry in the New Century," 434.

was displaced in the second half of the twentieth century by the easier charms of popular culture and its entertainment, such as TV, cinema, and music. The naive call by critics such as Gioia and Barr for a revival of narrative, epic, and formal poetry is not, in all likelihood, going to change the cultural status of poetry in America any time soon, unless, as Chasar suggests, the American poets leave their present-day location in the ivory tower of high-brow elitism and open up to the influence of popular culture. Such an approach to both the production and criticism of poetry might "reveal the practitioners and institutions of literary poetry to have been in more regular conversation with, and have had more influence on, the culture of popular poetry and its various manifestations that we might anticipate."[51] This process of poetic inclusion has already begun, with the proliferation of online poetry sites, blogs, course sites, literature and criticism archives, and so forth. To return to the starting point of this chapter, American poetry has, in the last half-century, proliferated, despite a marked history of claims about its demise. At the same time, the cultural relevance of poetry has not matched the postwar increase in its production. The problem of poetry's critical evaluation is another matter, and yet the death-of-poetry argument has been proven to be one-sided, untenable, and ridiculous in the face of the traditional and rising influence of poetry (and the language of poetry) upon the diverse genres of American popular culture. Poetry, argues C.K. Williams, is still a relevant genre that

> teaches us the limits of the elements of consciousness we value so—our reason, our discursive language, our notion that we can analyze the substances of being. Perhaps the real matter of the human soul is poetry itself; perhaps it is in the community that is established between the speaking soul of the poet and the attending soul of the listener that our consciousness, our

[51] Chasar, *Everyday Reading*, 218.

> culture and our selves find their ways of being saved from the awful deaths we imagine and die, the awful ephemeralities of our passage through eternity.[52]

Arguably, this function of American (and any) poetry will survive the debate about the death and/or marginalization of the genre since its tradition of providing instruction and pleasure addresses the larger and timeless questions of human existence and identity. Crisis in American poetry, yes, but it seems a far cry from any semblance of death and decline of the genre.

[52] C.K. Williams, *Poetry and Consciousness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 13.

Humor as a Method in Postwar American Culture Poetry

When critics lament the decline of the social importance of American poetry and proclaim that it has lost its audience, they seem to ignore a usable current in American poetry which has the potential for involving a wide spectrum of writers and readers.[1] The one element of poetry that has been overlooked in the analyses by these critics is humor. Although unacknowledged, there has been a lively and strong presence of humor in American poetry since colonial times and in the postwar period, this element made some of the major postwar American poems, from Koch's "Fresh Air" to Ginsberg's "America" to Gwynn's "The Narcissiad" and Collins's "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," memorable, entertaining, persuasive, and relevant to specialist and lay audiences as essential literary responses to the culture.

One of the results of the banishment of humor from most critical discussions of "serious" American poetry is the fact that by popular and critical agreement, it seems as if humor has been avoided altogether by the major authors of American poetry. Charles Harper Webb explains that this is the legacy of the Aristotelian preference for tragedy over comedy, and, by implication, of serious poetry over comic work: "To use a lot of humor, even for very serious ends, puts a poet's reputation at risk."[2] The avoidance of the comic element in traditional American poetry may thus have a practical explanation. W.H. Auden explains that the "serious" poet in America is not supposed to use humor, or produce poetry "for fun," or he or she would be frowned upon and

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1 For a detailed discussion of this argument about the death of (American) poetry and the decline of its public role and audience in the twentieth century, see the previous chapter.

2 Charles Harper Webb, "Say There Was: The Serious Humor of Mark Halliday," *Humor* 22, no. 3 (2009): 286.

his or her audience would be shocked.[3] Reed Whittemore similarly complains about the division of postwar American poetry into light and "heavy," or serious, verse, the former being represented by popular versifiers such as Ogden Nash or Phyllis McGinley, the latter by the more somber poets such as Robert Penn Warren.[4] Whittemore further claims that the distinction between light verse and serious poetry, although "rather characteristic of modern American verse in general," is detrimental to both camps as it drives both the comic versifier, such as Nash, and the serious poet, such as Warren, towards a limited poetic vision of postwar America whose diversity seems reduced by the application of Puritan attitudes to work and art. This is caused by the fact that "Americans seem to have some nasty scruples about mixing business and pleasure. Serious is serious and funny is funny, work is work and play is play; and if somebody comes along and starts to mix these neat categories, then there's trouble."[5]

Whenever a postwar American poet did produce a substantial body of comic verse, for example John Updike, he would feel it necessary to make an evaluative distinction between his serious verse and light verse, clearly placing more weight on the former. In Updike's case, the poet argues that "a [serious] poem derives from the real (the given, the substantial) world and light verse from the man-made world of information—books, newspapers, words, signs."[6] This distinction, however, becomes problematic as many serious poems have been sparked by random bits of language while many light verse ditties may assume the semantic complexity of serious poetry. In the introduction to the anthology *A Geography of Poets* (1979), Edward Field claims that the

3 See W.H. Auden, "American Poetry," in *The Dyer's Hand, and Other Essays* (London: Faber, 1987), 366.

4 Reed Whittemore, "The Two Rooms: Humor in Modern American Verse," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 5, no. 3 (1964): 185.

5 See Whittemore, "The Two Rooms," 186.

6 John Updike, "Preface," in *Collected Poems, 1953–1993* (New York: Knopf, 1993), xxiii.

evaluative division between light and serious verse "has almost ceased to exist. Humor is a major element in many poets' bag of tricks, though it is not widely understood that the shock in a poem that leads to laughter is as important as the shock that leads to tears and can be equally serious."[7] Still, poetry, and comic poetry in particular, has been almost entirely ignored by literary scholars. In *America's Humor* (1978), Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill prefer to avoid discussing humor in American poetry altogether while analyzing at great length the diverse traditions of humor that are to be found in American politics, fiction, print media, standup comedy, and film.[8] This avoidance of analysis of humor in poetry seems in tune with the traditional exclusion of American poetry as a genre from general criticism on American literature since, as Joseph Harrington documents in his survey of twentieth-century generalist studies of American literature from F.O. Matthiessen to the present, the field of American literature has been "traditionally defined by prose fiction."[9]

The traditional low opinion of the role of humor in American poetry does not do justice, however, to the existence of a wide range of comic possibilities that many poets have shown. M.L. Rosenthal calls for more critical attention to the potential of poetry as an essentially comic genre: "The readiest quarry for examples of modern American humour is our most serious and accomplished poetry. You can find the whole range here, from simple jokes to tall and bawdy tales to the most finely precarious balancing of the ludicrous and the painful."[10] In *God Be with the Clown* (1984), Ronald Wallace provides a persuasive argument for

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7 Edward Field, introduction to *A Geography of Poets* (New York: Bantam, 1979), xlii.

8 See Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill, *America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

9 Harrington, *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 159–60.

10 M.L. Rosenthal, "Volatile Matter: Humor in Our Poetry," *Massachusetts Review* 22, no. 4 (1981): 807.

the existence of a viable tradition of humor in "serious" American poetry.[11] Drawing on earlier scholarship by Constance Rourke, Richard Chase, Daniel Fuchs, and Louis D. Rubin, Wallace argues that major American poets such as Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and John Berryman are quintessentially comic writers whose poetry should be placed within "the rich and distinctive traditions of American humor."[12] Wallace explains that American poetry has been considered humorless, for, "in the popular mind, serious poetry [in America] has been equated with solemnity, humorlessness, and intellectual difficulty, while comic poetry has been equated with light verse."[13] Wallace's call for the re-evaluation of the role of humor in American poetry has not gone unheeded by later critics. A few years ago, Christina Pugh wondered in *Poetry* why "humorous poetry remains something of an oxymoron in our increasingly hermetic literary landscape."[14] Matthew Rohrer similarly asked recently why the element of humor had been so neglected in considerations of postwar and contemporary American poetry, even in the reputations of "serious" poets such as John Ashbery. Rohrer's conclusion is that humor and poetry have been understood as polar opposites that should not meet within the same context of serious poetry. Rohrer thinks that in American literary circles there has been a traditional fear of writing and liking comic poetry as something socially inappropriate, almost sacrilegious: "Some people seem to think that writing humorous poetry is a

11 Ronald Wallace, *God Be with the Clown: Humor in American Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984).

12 Wallace, *God Be with the Clown*, 5. The earlier volumes that trace various aspects of humor in American poetry include Constance Rourke, *American Humor* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931); Richard Chase, *Walt Whitman Reconsidered* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1955); Daniel Fuchs, *The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1963), and Louis D. Rubin, *The Comic Imagination in American Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973).

13 Wallace, *God Be with the Clown*, 4.

14 Christina Pugh, "Humor Anxiety," *Poetry* 189, no. 3 (2006): 228.

terrible crime, like pissing on Plymouth Rock."[15] American poets who have used humor in their poetry, despite its traditional marginalization to the realm of irrelevant light verse of little artistic consequence, have used irony, satire, and other approaches just as extensively as serious poetry has, producing poems that likewise explore life in its bittersweet complexity. Rohrer admits to having a dislike of poets who avoid humor in their work. He likens the reductionist exclusion of humor from many American poets' writing to the creative impasse of "artists who so systematically refuse to incorporate whole parts of their living personalities into their artistic work, giving us a take on complicated issues that is pale and one-dimensional and just downright suspicious."[16] In the editorial to a 2009 thematic issue of *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, Denise Duhamel and Salvatore Attardo lament the fact that in the 2000s, the field of research into humor in poetry was still largely unmapped as "not much has been written about humorous poetry."[17] This chapter aims to outline a working approach to the analysis of humor in the postwar American culture poets who will be examined in the rest of the book.

Wallace emphasizes another reason for the traditional neglect of humor in poetry studies and for the confusion of comic poetry with light verse. He claims that the problem lies in "the inadequacy of standard comic theory to deal with poetry, especially lyric poetry."[18] Since Aristotle, theories of humor have focused on discussing it as part of the analysis of comedy.[19] Ever since the

15 Matthew Rohrer, "Serious Art That's Funny: Humor in Poetry," *POETS.org*, accessed March 14, 2013, http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5887.

16 Rohrer, "Serious Art That's Funny: Humor in Poetry."

17 Denise Duhamel and Salvatore Attardo, "Introduction: Humor in Contemporary American Poetry," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 22, no. 2 (2009): 281.

18 Wallace, *God Be with the Clown*, 10.

19 See, for example, George Meredith, *An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit* (Westminster: Constable, 1903), and Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: Macmillan, 1911). Both writers analyze humor and comedy extensively, and yet do so, even when speaking of the comic

Romantic poets, exploration of the identity and emotions of the poet has been a dominant focus in poetry, which has resulted in the poets focusing on the production of a credible speaking voice and persuasive tone in the poem. Auden explains why this radical change in the social status of poetry (i.e., the shift from public to private discourse) happened at the time of the Romantic poets: "Isolated in an amorphous society with no real communal ties, bewildered by its complexity, horrified by its ugliness and power, and uncertain of an audience, [the Romantic poets] turned away from the life of their time to the contemplation of their own emotions and the creation of imaginary worlds."[20] William Wordsworth famously took poetry away from its earlier comic and didactic functions, which had been important for great satiric poets such as Horace, Pope, and Swift. Wordsworth called for the new poetry to be a literary mode for the examination of private feelings, whose tone would typically be melancholic and gloomy:

> Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.[21]

In this summary of Wordsworth's poetics, which appears in the preface to the revised edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), it is explained why the Romantic poet rejected the public and

poet, through the medium of comedy as a dramatic genre, not as a subgenre of poetry.

20 W.H. Auden, introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, ed. W.H. Auden (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), xv.

21 William Wordsworth, "Preface To *Lyrical Ballads*: 1800," in *Criticism: Major Statements*, ed. Charles Kaplan and William Davis Anderson, 4th ed. (Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's Press, 2000), 253.

didactic role of poetry on account of being unable to express the full range of human emotion with the language and form used by eighteenth-century classicist poets. Although the retreat of the poet from the public spotlight and subsequent embrace of private introspection has proven a very influential strategy since the Romantics, Auden pinpoints some of the problems which originate when a poet stops being a public figure who shares a language with their public and starts being a private prophet whose writings are no longer widely understood and appreciated because of their eccentricity. The result is that the prophet-poet may seldom be genuinely funny as the success of such a writer "lasts as long as he takes nothing very seriously; the moment he tries to be profound and 'poetic' he fails."[22]

One way of dealing with the problem of the classification of humor in American poetry is to use Auden's generous typology of "light verse" that he outlined as editor of *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*.[23] He claims to have included three types of poetry in his anthology:

(1) Poetry written for performance, to be spoken or sung before an audience
(2) Poetry intended to be read, but having for its subject matter the everyday social life of its period or the experiences of the poet as an ordinary human being
(3) Such nonsense poetry as, through its properties and technique, has a general appeal[24]

Clearly, the third category, which Auden reserves for nursery rhymes and the poems of such nineteenth-century English versifiers as Edward Lear, may be ignored as designating poetry that is too one-dimensional for the purposes of the present

22 Auden, introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, xvii.
23 First published in 1938.
24 Auden, introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, ix.

typology. The American comic poet whose work most readily belongs to the first two categories of Auden's typology of light verse (that is, poetry to be performed and read, with everyday subject matter that the audience may easily relate to whose form and language is easy for the audience to understand and appreciate) is Billy Collins. In his poetry, language does not, as a rule, surprise or shock with unknown phrases, yet his quiet tone of lyric introspection has won him a large audience among the general public.

Wallace argues that humor in American poetry might be studied through the analysis of the comic identity of the protagonist of the poem (who may or may not be identical with the speaker of the poem). Drawing on Aristotle, Constance Rourke, and Northrop Frye, Wallace outlines three principal archetypes of comic characters in American poetry—the Yankee wit (eiron), the backwoods braggart and self-impostor (alazon), and the minstrel absurdist.[25] The eiron is typically portrayed as "the witty self-deprecator" who "pretends to be less than he is," while the alazon is the exact opposite, a person who pretends to be more than he or she really is.[26] Third, there is the option of the minstrel character in whom the eiron and alazon archetypes blend. Added to these polar opposites is the minstrel's mixture "of sorrow, nonsense, and the grotesque."[27] Although the comic character or persona in a poem does not usually belong to just one of the three categories, it may be said that the comic braggart and impostor is best exemplified in numerous poems of Walt Whitman, the ironic self-deprecator is amply represented in the short lyrics

25 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. H. Rackham (London: Heinemann, 1956); Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 40; and Constance Rourke, *American Humor* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931), 117–18. The typology of the comic persona in American poetry is more recently elaborated by Ronald Wallace in his *God Be with the Clown: Humor in American Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 20–21.

26 Wallace, *God be with the Clown*, 13.

27 Wallace, *God Be with the Clown*, 20.

by Emily Dickinson, and the minstrel protagonist is masterfully explored by John Berryman in his *The Dream Songs*.

In "Song of the Open Road," Whitman bombastically claims: "I am larger, better than I thought, / I did not know I held so much goodness."[28] This statement, unlike many other self-celebratory lines, cannot just be interpreted on the literal level, without considering its comic potential to underscore the alazon (or impostor) element of the speaker. An example of the eiron character is the speaker in Emily Dickinson's poem no. 288:

> I'm Nobody! Who are you?
> Are you—Nobody—Too?
> Then there's a pair of us!
> Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!
>
> How dreary—to be—Somebody!
> How public—like a Frog—
> To tell one's name—the livelong June—
> To an admiring Bog![29]

While the deprecation of the speaker is evident in the first stanza, the second really implies that at the same time she downplays having a high opinion of herself ("How dreary—to be—Somebody!"). In a typical American comic poem, there is thus a merger of the eiron and alazon identities of the comic character whose self-flattery and/or self-deprecation give a complex image of the human being portrayed—in Whitman's poem, a sense of knowing that the cosmic, optimistic self is a comic mask, whereas the speaker in Dickinson's poem attempts to introduce herself as a person worthy

[28] Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," in *Complete Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 300.

[29] Emily Dickinson, "288," in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), 133.

of respect, and yet the only way she may communicate this belief is by the ironic presentation of herself as a character not worthy of any respect. A classic example of the minstrel persona who moves between the eiron and alazon extremes with a touch of the grotesque and melancholy is Berryman's poem no. 14 from *The Dream Songs*:

> Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
> After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
> we ourselves flash and yearn,
> and moreover my mother told me as a boy
> (repeatingly) "Ever to confess you're bored
> means you have no
>
> Inner Resources." I conclude now I have no
> inner resources, because I am heavy bored.[30]

The poem introduces a loud-mouth speaker who introduces his suffering in a theatrical way ("Life, friends, is boring.") yet goes on to undercut the potential for sentimentality with an undercutting smirk ("We must not say so.").

Ultimately, the subsequent chapters will treat humor in the culture poems selected for analysis on the basis of the nature of three comic elements—first, the comic character or persona (eiron, alazon, and/or minstrel), the comic situation, and the comic use of language. As has been shown above through the passages from Whitman, Dickinson, and Berryman, there is typically a mixture of types of persona and other comic effects at work, often one contradicting the other, which makes the American comic poem a complex, entertaining, and important statement on the human condition.

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[30] John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 16.

Allen Ginsberg: Odyssey in the American Supermarket

What happens if you make a distinction between what you tell your friends and what you tell your Muse?

Mind is shapely, Art is shapely.

Meanwhile have a ball. The universe is a new flower.
America will be discovered.

—Allen Ginsberg

The most culturally visible new poet of the 1950s, Allen Ginsberg (1926–97), has been called many things—prophet, revolutionary, iconoclast, madman, journalist, cynic, antinomian, gay rights activist, spokesman of the postwar American counterculture, and bard of the Beat Generation.[1] Even his detractors, such as Joseph Epstein, granted Ginsberg the status of the most famous American poet of his time, with the disclaimer that his "poetry isn't really what he is famous for: politics and homosexuality and a talent for the outrageous and a small genius for publicity are the four cornerstones on which his fame rests."[2] Whether this view is accepted or disputed, Ginsberg was indeed a poet who managed to raise strong reactions from his audiences for much of his

1 See, for example, Paul Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry since the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 22–41; Willard Spiegelman, *The Didactic Muse: Scenes of Instruction in Contemporary American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 78–99; Justin Quinn, *American Errancy: Empire, Sublimity & Modern Poetry* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2005), 72–86.

2 Joseph Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?," *Commentary* 86, no. 2 (1988): 19.

career, and who reached prominence, to a large extent, through a conscious exploration of American highbrow and popular culture with a view of the poet's role within the literary tradition. An eclectic thinker, Ginsberg's attitude to politics, culture, and arts ranged from denial to admiration as he, "when not announcing his absolute newness, was busily tracing his genealogical links with underground traditions and neglected masters, especially Blake and Whitman."[3] In this chapter, selected poems about American culture that also make use of humor will be discussed to provide an alternative to the dominant reading of Ginsberg as the serious prophet and iconoclast of the 1950s literary avant-garde.

The confidence in the value of his poetic vision was there in Ginsberg's poetry from the start, certainly from the hallucinatory experience of hearing William Blake recite his own poems that Ginsberg had in 1948:

> I experienced *The Sick Rose*, with the voice of Blake reading it, as something that applied to the whole universe, like hearing the doom of the whole universe, and at the same time the inevitable beauty of doom. I can't remember now, except it was very beautiful and very awesome. But a little of it slightly scary, having to do with the knowledge of death—my death and also the death of being itself, and that was the great pain. So, like a prophecy, not only in human terms but a prophecy as if Blake had penetrated the very secret core of the entire universe and had come forth with some little magic formula statement in rhyme and rhythm that, if properly heard in the inner inner ear, would deliver you beyond the universe.[4]

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3 James E.B. Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945–1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 77–78.

4 Thomas Clark, "Allen Ginsberg, The Art of Poetry No. 8," *Paris Review* 37 (1966): http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4389/the-art-of-poetry-no-8-allen-ginsberg.

As a self-proclaimed follower of the visionary attitude to life and art that he adopted from the example of Christopher Smart, William Blake, and Walt Whitman, Ginsberg complained that Beat and other experimental poetry in the 1950s "has been attacked by an ignorant & frightened bunch of bores who don't understand how it's made, & the trouble with these creeps is they wouldn't know Poetry if it came up and buggered them in broad daylight."[5] Such remarks, meant to shock the literary establishment of the 1950s and to call more attention to the writings of Ginsberg and other poets who were his contemporaries and whose use of language and form proved a challenge to the mainstream academic formalism of the times, were carefully planned. As Robert Crawford explains, Ginsberg's criticism of American culture and academia was more of a public relations trick than deep-felt animosity, for he was very much a beneficiary of the boom and professionalization in the postwar American university world, as well as its most famous critic among poets: "Throughout his career as wildman he maintained a symbiotic relationship with academia and the student audience," becoming a public relations wizard, "a media-poet who longed for and courted stardom."[6] Ginsberg has been hailed as the bard of the Beat Generation of American avant-garde writers, and yet his comic side has been practically ignored in favor of the exploration of his bardic iconoclasm in the tradition of Anglo-American visionary poetry. The examples of Blake, Smart, and Whitman inspired Ginsberg with their ability to shock their audience with excessive use of language and breaking into taboo subject matter. This chapter will provide a survey of several major Ginsberg poems which examine the relationship of the poet to the public spheres of society, politics, and cultural tradition.

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5 Allen Ginsberg, "Notes for *Howl* and Other Poems," in *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 417.

6 Robert Crawford, *The Modern Poet: Poetry, Academia, and Knowledge since the 1750s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 246.

The poems which Ginsberg wrote in the late 1940s and early 1950s are notable for their almost total adherence to traditional forms and themes. The young Ginsberg tried to write traditional, Elizabethan poetry whose use of rhyme and poetic diction may have pleased his Columbia teachers Lionel Trilling and Mark Van Doren, but this poetics did not seem adequate to accommodate his cosmic vision of the postwar American diversity in which he struggled to find a place of his own. In an early poem, "After Dead Souls," Ginsberg portrays America as a mystical Other, personified as a muse whose inviting geography is a something for the young poet to study and honor, while he probes the limits of his identity as he embarks on the archetypal American quest for ultimate knowledge that takes the form of an imagined road trip:

> Where O America are you
> going in your glorious
> automobile, careening
> down the highway
> toward what crash
> in the deep canyon
> of the Western Rockies
> or racing the sunset
> over Golden Gate
> toward what wild city
> jumping with jazz
> on the Pacific Ocean![7]

In this little poem Ginsberg evokes the Whitmanian continental impulse to travel and envelop the otherness and diversity of the whole country and continent, drawing on earlier twentieth-century

[7] Allen Ginsberg, "After Dead Souls," in *Collected Poems, 1947–1997* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 73.

travel poems such as "Travels in North America" by Weldon Kees.[8] Ginsberg's speaker in "After Dead Souls" glorifies the visionary potential of the American West Coast, implying the place to be is San Francisco, the "wild city / jumping with jazz / on the Pacific Ocean!"[9] that has been a traditional hotbed of avant-garde trends in culture and the arts. The tone of the poem is one of serious, vague exuberance, of rebellion against the family and social order, as the poet seeks to move beyond the "dead souls" of literary tradition and the postwar conformist atmosphere to find his true self in the less constricting realm of long-distance travel. The language of the poem is already typical Ginsberg—vague and implicatory, yet the approach to the road trip theme is conservative, traditional, as if the poem did not belong to the postwar period in which American poets increasingly responded, as M.L. Rosenthal documents, to "a new sense of unease and disorder."[10] In "After Dead Souls," Ginsberg is still probing the limits of his youthful embrace of America as an inchoate object of desire, using archaic language and traditional form that do not allow his sensibility to fully come through.

In his early, pre-*Howl* formative writing period of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ginsberg repeatedly explored the notion of imagined travel across the country that would bring an all-embracing vision of American culture. The car as a symbol of American mobility and power is utilized to this end in "The Green Automobile," another poem which functions as homage to a mythic vehicle that makes all things possible: "If I had a Green Automobile / I'd go find my old companion / in his house on the Western ocean."[11] The car becomes Ginsberg's ticket to finding

8 See Weldon Kees, "Travels in North America," in *The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees*, ed. Donald Justice (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 114–19.

9 Ginsberg, "After Dead Souls," 73.

10 M.L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 5.

11 Allen Ginsberg, "The Green Automobile," in *Collected Poems, 1947–1997* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 91.

his identity, which is imagined to be behind the wheel, in the car, which becomes "more real than the engine / on a track in the desert / purer than Greyhound and / swifter than physical jetplane."[12] For all the potential travel holds for the revelation of the poet's self, Ginsberg undercuts the importance of the automobile as a symbol of freedom with a sobering realization that this fantasy is ridiculous and futile: "I give you in flight / a present, a present / from my imagination."[13] The tension between reality and the imagination of the poet is at the core of Ginsberg's early culture poems in which America is imagined as an exciting theater for the poet's visionary escapades and attempts at socialization on his own, iconoclastic terms.

One of Ginsberg's best-known early culture poems from the mid-fifties is "A Supermarket in California." Gone is the archaic language and naiveté of the earlier poems; in "A Supermarket in California" Ginsberg focuses on immediate subject matter that is very 1950s—finding intellectual rapport with his poetic mentors in the midst of a supermarket, an iconic temple of consumerism and suburban sprawl that highlights the decline of traditional values and beliefs in postwar America.

The poem starts with Ginsberg comically "invoking his muse," in the tradition of epic poetry introductions, only with the ironic difference that he imagines himself in the inglorious situation of walking, lonely, "down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the full moon."[14] In order to find his place within the America of the moment, Ginsberg invokes the presence of Walt Whitman, his poetic and social activist American model. Ginsberg imagines, with full knowledge of the comic nature of such an outing, a meeting with the old bard in a very unintellectual, lowbrow setting: "In my hungry fatigue, and shopping

12 Ginsberg, "The Green Automobile," 92.

13 Ginsberg, "The Green Automobile," 94.

14 Allen Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California," in *Collected Poems, 1947–1997* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 144.

for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!"[15] Against the backdrop of the supermarket, portrayed as a haven full of fresh and delicious groceries that attract the consumer's eye, Ginsberg comically juxtaposes the joy experienced by the happy American shoppers who crave mass-marketed food with the intellectual "shopping" done by the poets who pretend to resist such mindless hedonism, yet admit to seeing the world in a crate of fresh and glittering food: "We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier."[16] The Whitman father figure is joined for a moment by Garcia Lorca, another poetic forebear of Ginsberg's, and they are used as the rhetorical recipients of the poet's comic plea for somebody to materialize and share his antinomian thoughts. Whitman, however, remains a silent figure in Ginsberg's poem and does not respond to his pupil's questioning. Ginsberg thus has to interpret the shopping experience on his own. He then presents himself as a social outcast who tries to reach Whitman through the pretense of madcap shopping for immaterial products that cannot really be bought: "Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight? / (I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd.)"[17] The comic relating of the shopping experience to *The Odyssey* further highlights the gap between traditional education, which included the knowledge of the great epic poems of the classics, and the unliterary postwar development of America, which increasingly favored the conservative ideals of consumerism and political conservatism, with shopping being one of the few joys left for the suburban family. Ultimately, what Ginsberg as a young radical poet of the 1950s seems to share with Whitman is a sense of accepting his difference, social marginalization, and

[15] Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California," 144.
[16] Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California," 144.
[17] Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California," 144.

the bitter realization that his personal and artistic preferences are not recognized and honored by his audience: "Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add shade to shade, light out in the houses, we'll both be lonely."[18] In a way, the refusal of Ginsberg to be charmed by the fresh, glamorous products on sale which are happily explored by other shoppers ("Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!")[19] is his way of maintaining an elitist distance from the lowbrow subject of grocery shopping and postwar anti-intellectualism.[20] Moreover, Ginsberg's invocation of the Whitman figure, the "childless, lonely old grubber," as a fellow-contender in a culture that has lost its respect for great literature and the arts and favors conformity and the conservatism of a market-driven culture, here exemplified by the supermarket setting, is a denial of the possibility of failure and loss in the predominantly winning and prosperous fifties. In that era, as Paul Breslin explains, it seemed that "before long American prosperity could absorb everyone into the middle class without any political conflict."[21] Indeed, "A Supermarket in California" marks the against-the-grain complaint of the young middle-class outsider poet and intellectual about losing subject matter to write bitter poems about: "Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?"[22] The existence of a marginalized artist is out, shopping (and a love of shopping) is in. The idealized cottage retreat of the reclusive poet such as Whitman and, before him, the Transcendentalist writers such as Henry David Thoreau, is no

18 Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California," 144.

19 Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California," 144.

20 Compare with Frank O'Hara, "A Step Away from Them," in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 257–58. In this well-known lunch poem O'Hara adopts a similar willed distance from the people he meets on the streets of New York City, from millionaires to construction workers.

21 Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse*, 3.

22 Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California," 144.

longer accessible to the young American writer in the 1950s, and Ginsberg does not see any potential for optimism in the glorification of supermarket consumerism that the unwitting masses of "whole families shopping at night" willingly succumb to. Yet he refrains from simple highbrow rejection of the shopping culture for whatever cheap gratification it promises. Supermarket shopping has thus replaced the fragmented systems of belief and religion in America by the 1950s, so Ginsberg oscillates between what Robert Pinsky considers "those rather fondly observed things, and the vague craving for his impossible America,"[23] a utopian vision of America that honors its artists and rejects the cult of materialism and consumerism. With the choice of California for the regional anchoring of his supermarket poem, Ginsberg acknowledges a debt to Kenneth Rexroth, whose "Vitamins and Roughage" similarly explores new cultural trends that appear in California, in the latter poem's case the updating of the classical clash of the physical and intellectual sides of the young American identity. In the bittersweet shopping fantasy of "A Supermarket in California," the poet's tone ranges between ecstasy and elegy, two divergent modes which Willard Spiegelman considers "the twin halves of his [Ginsberg's] poetic personality."[24] Ultimately, the supermarket becomes a metaphor for heedless American consumerism and lowbrow cultural taste, which the poet tries to question by trying to claim ownership of "every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier" in a fantasy of petty theft that is comically presented as a brave act of civil disobedience. If Ginsberg has been criticized for having repudiated America's literary and cultural tradition and for his persistent distaste for postwar American capitalism and international policy, "A Supermarket in California" is a mock-elegiac poem in which he tries to restore the connections to the visionary cosmic self explored earlier by Blake and Whitman, against

23 Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 170.

24 Spiegelman, *The Didactic Muse*, 98–99.

the backdrop of a quintessentially American activity of grocery shopping late in the evening in the state of California, where much new cultural development in the 20th century originated.[25] The speaker in "A Supermarket in California" is a grotesque minstrel who shifts between acceptance of his lowbrow self and loathing of the same, whose comic invocation of poetic models to help him shop for lost ideals highlights the anti-intellectual atmosphere of 1950s American society. Through glorification of the supermarket shopping experience, the poem provides a metaphor for the ultimate social meeting place of the time, which is no longer the church or a public gathering, but, rather, the glittering space with numerous products whose attractive packaging caters to the sensibility of postwar Americans more than idealistic immersion in artistic traditions. The poem thus captures the spirit of the times, which, on the one hand, brought unprecedented prosperity for the widening American middle class, and yet, on the other hand, contributed to the rise of collectivist consumerism and a deadening sense of conformity that American poets, both mainstream academic formalists such as Richard Wilbur and avant-garde iconoclasts such as Ginsberg, found it essential to rebel against.[26]

A central Ginsberg poem from the 1950s that further explores the poet's problematic attitude towards the dominant culture and politics is "America." From the very first line, the poem oscillates between the poet's claim to be a prophetic heir to the use of the cosmic self that accommodates the private and public paranoia of the 1950s about the threat of nuclear war and left-wing

[25] On the Beat writers' rejection of the dominant literary, political, and cultural discourse of the 1950s, see Hyatt H. Waggoner, *American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 565. As I try to argue, however, Ginsberg never rejected American society, culture, and literary tradition altogether, as his playful yet serious reaching out to Whitman in "A Supermarket in California" amply documents.

[26] See Jiří Flajšar, "Poetry of the American Suburbs—A Postwar Exercise in Non-Conformity," in *Conformity and Resistance in America*, ed. Jacek Gutorow and Tomasz Lebiecki (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007), 88–89.

witch-hunts. To address the political atmosphere of the time, "the tranquilized *Fifties*,"[27] as Robert Lowell called the decade, Ginsberg speaks out as a playful Whitmanian braggart, as well as Dickinsonian self-deprecator, who tries to understate his own insignificance for the contrary rhetorical effect of emphasizing his larger-than-life poetic ambition: "America I've given you all and now I'm nothing. / American two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1956. / I can't stand my own mind."[28] This playful self-introduction, followed by an admission of the careful calculation of spare cash that turns into madness, is miles away from Lowell's concurrent admission of his own mental instability, "My mind's not right."[29] Whereas Lowell makes his claim from the vantage point of being the scion of the American poetry establishment of the 1950s, Ginsberg speaks from the 1950s margin, a Beat Generation poet whose mock-angry diatribe against rightwing officialdom and stuffy established literary and political structures rings comic, as well as deadly serious. Ginsberg's diatribe against postwar American society and politics goes on in a mock-serious vein that incorporates sheer vulgarity without the effect of shock:

> America when will we end the human war?
> Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.
> I don't feel good don't bother me.
> I won't write my poem till I'm in my right mind.[30]

Lacking the apocalyptic angle of the perverse anti-establishment counterculture spokesman of "Howl," the speaker in "America"

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27 Robert Lowell, "Memories of West Street and Lepke," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Girous, 2003), 187.

28 See Allen Ginsberg, "America," in *Collected Poems, 1947–1997* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 154.

29 See Robert Lowell, "Skunk Hour," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous, 2003), 191.

30 Ginsberg, "America," 154.

nonetheless presents a complex portrait of Ginsberg's ambivalence about his marginalized social position as an unacknowledged bard in a society that favors intellectual conformity and the observation of conservative Puritan values and does not tolerate any deviant views on politics, arts, education, the media, and culture. Gregory M. Dandeles notes the irony that Ginsberg's "America" appropriates some of Whitman's poetic strategies (the litany, catalog, and so forth), but the younger poet uses these to convey a thoroughly antiwar message, whereas "Whitman was often an adamantly pro-war poet."[31]

Paul Breslin explains that part of the problem with accepting Ginsberg's antinomian attitude towards the American establishment and the threats of war of the 1950s as credible is caused by the poet's conviction that "all authority is absolute, and is either divine or demonic", which results in "the uncertainty whether his own rebellion is prophecy or paranoia" and ultimately leads the poet to "the attraction to wild generalizations."[32] One might add that "America" also succeeds as a result of the poet's skillful mixing of irony and comedy. Edward Brunner thinks that the speaker of "America" functions as a typical antiestablishment intellectual of the time, "as an individual who is harassed by the various demands made by his own country on him to act as a responsible citizen."[33] Indeed, Ginsberg's reaction to the Cold War atmosphere of the threat of a nuclear attack resembles the adoption of a mask of insanity that allows him to say unsayable truths

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31 See Gregory M. Dandeles, "The Laurel Tree Cudgel: Walt Whitman and War in Allen Ginsberg's 'America,'" *Journal of American Culture* 36, no. 3 (2013): 221. Dandeles juxtaposes the different portraits of war in Ginsberg's "America" and Whitman's "Eighteen Sixty-One." Both poets approach war (a real war in Whitman's case, an imagined nuclear war in Ginsberg's case), and yet their attitude is very different—where Whitman is patriotic, Ginsberg remains an antiwar orator whose patriotism is, at best, dubious.

32 Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse*, 40.

33 Edward Brunner, *Cold War Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 270.

about the stifling social atmosphere of the time beneath a layer of comic madness.

The poem is told in the undisguised voice of the poet himself, Allen Ginsberg on a specified day in 1956.[34] However, Ginsberg speaks from a double perspective—switching back and forth between the single voice of what Willard Spiegelman calls "a paranoid outsider and the mythic voice of America itself."[35]

For all of its madcap rhetoric of a conscientious objector to a possible third world war, "America" is one of the great comic and satirical poems of the Cold War era whose social commentary is explicit yet ambiguous, considering the degree of Ginsberg's use of humor in the poem. If the Wallace classification of the comic poet persona is applied to Ginsberg's "America," there is a mix of all three comic personas in the poem—the boastful fool (alazon), witty self-deprecator (eiron), and minstrel who combines "a note of sorrow, nonsense, and the grotesque."[36] As Auden reminds us, "every poet is at once a representative of his culture and its critic."[37] Since Ginsberg's ambition in "America" seems to be both to entertain and instruct, it is useful to consider the speaker as a serious and comic duality, while the reader is in the role of what

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34 January 17, 1956. The emphasis on locating the poem's date of creation is a generic attribute of all the poems in Ginsberg's *Collected Poems*, suggesting the meticulous care that the poet paid, from his early published career as a poet, to dating his writings with a view to the later anthologization and scholarly analysis of his works. However, the 1956 date given at the end of "America" marks the date of its final revision, as Ginsberg's own journals contain references to the poem dating back to 1954 and 1955. See Gregory M. Dandeles, "The Laurel Tree Cudgel: Walt Whitman and War in Allen Ginsberg's 'America,'" *Journal of American Culture* 36, no. 3 (2013), 223–24.

35 Spiegelman, *The Didactic Muse*, 78.

36 See Ronald Wallace, *God Be with the Clown: Humor in American Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 20.

37 W.H. Auden, "Robert Frost," in *The Dyer's Hand, and Other Essays* (London: Faber, 1987), 352.

Christopher Clausen considers the delineation of "the person for whom the explanation [of America] is intended."[38]

The America in Ginsberg's poem is an unheeding reflector of his reformist cries, yet its role is crucial as a participant in Ginsberg's meditation on culture and politics, even if it functions as an indifferent outside force capable of naturalistic vengeance:

> America when will you be angelic?
> When will you take off your clothes?
> When will you look at yourself through the grave?
> When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?
> America why are your libraries full of tears?
> America when will you send your eggs to India?[39]

By this time, Ginsberg deflates the level of his impassioned rhetoric with a smirk that is directed at his country as much as at himself: "I'm sick of your insane demands."[40] The tone of "America" seems to offer a single reading that, as Breslin notes, juggles the contradictory notions of madness and transcendence in the same breath of the poet's line.[41] When Ginsberg asks, "When can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with

[38] See Christopher Clausen, "Exploration of America," in *New Expansive Poetry*, ed. R.S. Gwynn (Ashland: Story Line Press, 1999), 230. Clausen really has in mind "An Explanation of America" by Robert Pinsky, a major narrative poem about American culture from the late 1970s, yet Ginsberg's "America," while serving as a culture poem precursor to the Pinsky poem, seems to be a mock-didactic poem whose self-deprecating autobiographical speaker has the similarly Whitmanian ambition to convey all of American culture at a particular moment in the mid-1950s. The one difference between Pinsky's "Explanation" and Ginsberg's "America" is the choice of tone (with Pinsky choosing the serious didactician and Ginsberg the madcap radical) and speaker in each poem (Pinsky addresses his own young daughter in his poem and embarks on extended passages of omniscient narration, whereas Ginsberg is content to converse with various shades of himself).

[39] Ginsberg, "America," 154.

[40] Ginsberg, "America," 154.

[41] See Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse*, 40.

my good looks?"[42], the intertextual wink at "A Supermarket in California" is made with the usual double gesture of a boastful braggart and ironic self-deprecator who knows that this plea for social justice is an outrageous impossibility, yet who believes in his own holiness and value to the degree that he feels justified in making such a grotesque assertion about his importance within mainstream society. The phantasmagorical tirade goes on with another wisecrack that contains more than a grain of truth about the modern-age loss of faith in traditional religion: "America after all it is you and I who are perfect not the next world."[43] The Whitmanian poet feels perfect, no joke intended, regardless of the physical, mental, and other measurable deficiencies of the body and mind. After several lines, Ginsberg's rant becomes more grounded as commentary on the communist witch hunts of the 1950s: "America I used to be a communist when I was a kid I'm not sorry. / I smoke marijuana every chance I get."[44] With the second line, the poem launches into a catalog of insane and illegal activities that the poet participates in to feed his hunger for radically new experience that breaks away from established religion: "I won't say the Lord's Prayer. / I have mystical visions and cosmic vibrations."[45] Although the Ginsberg way may have felt like a media-eschewing path of mystic insanity, he has really paid close attention to the influence of the American print media of the time. When he asks, "Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?"[46], he addresses, on the one hand, the American[47] that he wishes to see reformed back to a utopian ideal of leftwing camaraderie and visionary antisocial activity, on the other hand, he addresses the "you" as the generic reader or addressee of his

42 Ginsberg, "America," 154.
43 Ginsberg, "America," 154.
44 Ginsberg, "America," 154.
45 Ginsberg, "America," 154.
46 Ginsberg, "America," 154.
47 Ginsberg, "America," 155.

social criticism. The denunciation of *Time Magazine* goes on as Ginsberg positions himself above such media manipulation: "I'm obsessed by Time Magazine. / I read it every week. / Its cover stares at me every time I slink past the corner candystore."[48] The comic juxtaposition of the lifestyle promoted by the coverage of America in *Time Magazine* with the counterculture of Ginsberg's Beat poet and madman mask highlights the topicality of the poem and its historic relevance. When Ginsberg discourses on the "seriousness" of the content of the magazine and on the serious nature of the American dream, which includes social and economic success, he deflates the balloon of solemn oratory about the model career path for the 1950s reader ("Businessmen are serious. / Movie producers are serious. Everybody's serious but me.")[49] with another self-deflating realization of the individualist and futile nature of his private rebellion: "It occurs to me that I am America. / I am talking to myself again."[50] Dandeles explains that this is the real social contribution of Ginsberg, who is now "simultaneously talking to and for America"; being its critic and spokesman, with his dual role set against the mirror of his country's conservative cosmology, he is required to "do America's soul-searching, confronting his nation's shortcomings not to condemn them, but to fix them, violently."[51] Ginsberg's angry rant seems ignored by the audience of McCarthy-era careerists, yet the prophet of mild apocalypse goes on anyway. The poem manages to blend the stance of social "outsider and insider, paranoia and fist shaking, pathos and high comedy, social commentary and personal confession."[52]

The second, shortest stanza of "America" contains a catalog of paranoid delusions that supposedly put the poet's holy mission at

48 Ginsberg, "America," 155.
49 Ginsberg, "America," 155
50 Ginsberg, "America," 155.
51 Dandeles, "The Laurel Tree Cudgel," 228.
52 Spiegelman, *The Didactic Muse,* 79.

risk of failure: "I haven't got a chinaman's chance. / I'd better consider my national resources. / My national resources consist of two joints of marijuana millions of genitals an unpublishable private literature that jetplanes 1400 miles an hour and twentyfive-thousand mental institutions."[53] The dual mask of braggart and self-deprecator is perhaps best evident in the last, expansive line, which exposes the poet's serious rant as crazy comedy at bottom. While Ginsberg elaborates on the ways in which the country has tortured him, the insanity of his complaint makes the whole section ludicrously effective as the poet raves on, using a Whitmanian cosmic embrace: "I say nothing about my prisons nor the millions of underprivileged who live in my flowerpots under the light of five hundred suns."[54]

The last stanza of "America" begins with another self-deprecatory remark: "America how can I write a holy litany in your silly mood?"[55] The humor of the poem lies in Ginsberg's conscious exploration of the outrageous nature of his argument, which he repeatedly undermines with realist commentary. Then he embarks on the most expansive gesture towards cosmic inclusiveness of the speaker who lists a series of leftist radicals persecuted in American history ("America I am the Scottsboro boys.")[56] and at the present. The ultimate parody of the anti-communist hysteria of the 'fifties, fueled by the American politicians and media, is reflected in the ironic presentation of "them bad Russians" who want "to eat us alive. The Russia's power mad. She wants to take our cars from our garages."[57] By means of this attack on the sacred beliefs of Americans in private property and the car as a symbol of postwar suburban affluence, Ginsberg undermines the master narrative of postwar American progress by exposing its moral vacuity. The poem ends on a populist note that, again, is mock-serious in its plea:

53 Ginsberg, "America," 155.
54 Ginsberg, "America," 155.
55 Ginsberg, "America," 155.
56 Ginsberg, "America," 155.
57 Ginsberg, "America," 155.

America this is quite serious.
America this is the impression I get from looking in the television set.
America is this correct?
I'd better get down to the job.
It's true I don't want to join the Army or turn lathes in precision parts factories, I'm nearsighted and psychopathic anyway.
America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.[58]

The closure of the poem brings a ludicrous call to social action whose seriousness is instantly undermined when the countercultural nature of the poet is taken into account. Ginsberg himself readily admits to having numerous physical and mental deficiencies that disqualify him from acting as the agent of social change that he calls for. His homosexuality is highlighted in the final line, to the comic effect of Ginsberg presenting it an ambiguous vehicle of social integration.

The tone of Ginsberg's "America" is tragicomic throughout—the poem includes extremes of lyric tenderness and angry vulgarity, both of which are spiced with grotesque expositions of the conformist atmosphere of the 1950s, in which any deviation from the narratives promoted by politicians, the media, and the neighbors is not tolerated. What remains for the poet to say is either complicity with the established narratives of American culture, acceptance of anti-Russian hysteria and persecution of leftists in the public sphere, to criticize the situation, or, which is Ginsberg's choice, to ridicule the propaganda by using its totalitarian rhetoric to subversive, satirical ends. Richard Howard explains that Ginsberg as a 1950s prophet is successful in getting his message across because he "is a man personally accessible to anyone, and at any time, because he is—has taken care to be—a person."[59] Poems

58 Ginsberg, "America," 155.

59 Richard Howard, *Alone with America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950* (New York: Atheneum, 1980), 177.

such as "A Supermarket in California" and "America" do indeed showcase the everyman side of Ginsberg's vision of the public poet and his role as teacher and entertainer. The deceptive success of the ambiguous, conversational tone of both poems marks an early high point of Ginsberg's poetics of inclusive social criticism that is enriched with a minstrel's penchant for entertaining exposure of the grotesque and tragic that is hidden beneath the façade of 1950s conformist America.

Kenneth Koch: The Poet as Serious Comic

This chapter will deal with the comic style developed in the early 1950s by Kenneth Koch, an unacknowledged master of formal and free verse whose work has not yet garnered adequate critical attention. Kenneth Koch (1925–2002) started to publish in the early 1950s as a poet influenced by European surrealism, Dadaism, Modernism, modern art, and popular culture. Mixing elements from the highbrow and lowbrow extremes of culture, Koch pioneered a poetry that oscillates between the surreal, comic, didactic, and elegiac. Kenneth Koch later satirized the postwar situation of American poetry and the inadequacy of the New Critical conservatism as follows:

> It was the time, it was the nineteen fifties,
> When Eisenhower was President, I think,
> And the Cold War, like *Samson Agonistes*,
> Went roughly on, and we were at the brink.
> No time for Whitsuntides or Corpus Christis—
> Dread drafted all with its atomic clink.
> *The Waste Land* gave the time's most accurate data,
> It seemed, and Eliot was the Great Dictator
> Of literature. One hardly dared to wink
> Or fool around in any way in poems
> And Critics poured out awful jereboams
> To irony, ambiguity, and tension—
> And other things I do not wish to mention.[1]

[1] Kenneth Koch, "Seasons on Earth," in *Seasons on Earth* (New York: Viking, 1987), 7. It is remarkable that Koch, a brilliant formalist poet, reserved his use of rhyme and meter for his epic and narrative poems while avoiding it in his short lyric and didactic poems.

While this 1980s take on the Fifties is an example of brilliant formalist satire that exposes the habitual stuffiness of the mainstream American poetry world of the 1950s, Koch achieved recognition early with a style that playfully undermined this mainstream. As one of the original New York School poets, along with John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, Koch made short, unrhymed, playful, irreverent poems about everyday subjects, as well as about allusions to literature and art, his trademark. The label of a funny poet whose experimentation with language and meaning avoids direct relation to culture and society did not come without a price, however. For years, Koch was considered a funny poet whose work was not to be taken seriously. David Lehman explains that Koch "has had the misfortune to be a protean comic genius at a moment when the lyric poem is the be-all and end-all of verse and is mistakenly held to be incompatible with the spirit of comedy."[2] Charles Harper Webb recalls that Koch would react badly to this popular misrecognition as a trailblazer of postwar American comic poetry by retorting, "I'm not a humorous poet," which makes sense as a reaction to the traditional preference of critics and readers for "serious" poetry over comic writing.[3] So calling Koch a one-dimensional comic poet and surrealist would be an oversimplification. Mark Halliday, a poet and critic who has been much influenced by Koch's work and attitudes to art and life, distinguishes at least two major modes in Koch's poetry, "the current of wacky wildness" and "the current of discursive meditation and argument."[4] Robert Pinsky defines two opposing, yet complementary meanings of the term "discursive" as relevant to recent American poetry. First, "the word describes speech or writing which is wandering and disorganized"; second, it may also

2 David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Anchor, 1999), 205.

3 Charles Harper Webb, "Say There Was: The Serious Humor of Mark Halliday," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 22, no. 3 (2009): 285–86.

4 Mark Halliday, "Koch and Sense," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 36, no. 1 (1997): 203.

suggest an element of explication, of being "pointed, organized around a setting forth of material."[5] In the case of Koch's longer poems, the organization of the subject matter into persuasive rhetoric is unobtrusive, yet a definite presence which contributes to the richness of his style.[6]

The later, discursive style of Koch's poetry, Halliday argues, goes beyond the short-lived appeal of Koch's early poetry of excitement as "the prince of nonsense becomes a statesman of sense—usually comic sense, but often at the same time serious didactic sense or serious elegiac sense."[7] Still, it was the first, "wacky wildness" style of Koch that brought him early recognition. Joshua Weiner explains that New York School poets such as Koch used "accident and play in their spirited disregard for the decorum of refined diction, high-flown syntax, traditional symbology, and elevated abstraction—all the elements that contributed to the serious meatloaf of the mid-century lyric."[8] An early example of this style is "Sun Out," the first poem of Koch's *The Collected Poems*, a volume that is introduced by a sequence of the short playful poems that Koch chose to leave unpublished until late in his career:

Bananas, piers, limericks,
I am postures
Over there, I, are
The lakes of delectation
Sea, sea you! Mars and win-
Some buffalo

5 Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 134.

6 By longer poems one means poems whose length goes up to several pages. The several notable book-length epic poems by Koch are not discussed here as their style and usage of traditional form does not really fit the present analysis of his short and mid-length lyric pieces.

7 Halliday, "Koch and Sense," 204.

8 Joshua Weiner, "The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch," *Chicago Review* 52, nos. 2–4 (2006): 345.

They thinly raft the plain,
Common do

It ice-floes, hit-and-run drivers,
The mass of wind.
Is that snow
H-ing at the door? And we
Come in the buckle, a
Vanquished distinguished
Secret festival, relieving flights
Of the black brave ocean.[9]

The poem shows the gist of the radical 1950s anti-poetics of Koch as well as any of the numerous short lyrics that followed in his long and productive career.[10] The theme of the poem is ultimately impossible to pin down unless one accepts the poet's conscious decision to depart from the mimetic function of lyric poetry toward exploration of the comic function of language as an end in itself. The speaker's identity in "Sun Out" is vague and ambiguous, lost in language games ("I am postures / Over there")[11] that may not provide the kind of authoritative meaning that traditional lyric poetry does, yet the poem rewards the attempt at appreciation. As Halliday observes, in such poetry, "words jump out of their clothes and run free from their meanings" in a mixture of "comic surrealism" and "urbanity with nonsense."[12] John Bernard Myers claims that for Koch, "the surface of a work of art is the work of art. The color and timbre of individual words, as well as clusters

9 Kenneth Koch, "Sun Out," in *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 5.

10 Koch also published several notable book-length epic poems which were later collected in Kenneth Koch, *On the Edge: Collected Long Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2009).

11 Koch, "Sun Out," 5.

12 Halliday, "Koch and Sense," 203.

of words, is what poetry is."[13] Indeed, as long as one sheds the traditional expectations of meaning in poetry, passages such as "Mars and win— / Some buffalo / They thinly raft the plain,"[14] sustain the reader's interest even while such poetry flatly refuses to meet the rhetorical obligation to mean an identifiable thing. Weiner explains that such poetry is a fitting poetic reaction against the conventions of mid-century formalism, where the anti-formalist, anti-academic poem by Koch serves as "a slippery semantic field of puns, parodic snippets, homonyms, fractured syntax, and jarring juxtapositions."[15] The effect of "Sun Out" is not to disrupt the reader's expectations of poetry, meaning, and aesthetic pleasure by "making fun of poetry"; rather, Koch attempts here to make poetry and its language, syntax, and rhyming fun for its own sake.[16] Charles Bernstein speaks of the effect the writing of Gertrude Stein, the matriarch of American experimental poetry, had on him, which could well be a summary of the effect of Koch's "Sun Out" style of playful experimentation that challenges all notions about the elements of poetry and meaning:

> … my own primary and continuing response to Stein's
> poetry is one of intense pleasure in the music of the language:
> of hearing a palpable, intense, I'm tempted
> to say absolute, sense-making: you can almost taste it;
> a great plenitude of meaning, of possibility for language,
> in language.[17]

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13 See John Bernard Myers, "The Poets of the New York School," in *The Poets of the New York School* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1969), 22–24.

14 Koch, "Sun Out," 5.

15 Weiner, "The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch," 346.

16 See Weiner, "The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch," 346.

17 Charles Bernstein, "Professing Stein / Stein Professing," in Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 142–43.

Koch himself spoke of his early writing period, exemplified by the "Sun Out" type of non-mimetic linguistic exuberance, as an exercise in using the "double or triple quality of words that I imperfectly understood, along with the repetitions, substitutions, and interruptions that for me seemed to go with it, including the abundant use of quotations and exclamations."[18] When compared to the formalist mainstream culture poetry of the 1950s, such as that of Howard Nemerov, the degree of innovation of Koch becomes apparent:

> What is it that one sells, the self?
> I think not. One sells always time
> Dissembled in heroic stone: such eyes
> As look like cloud-reflecting lakes
> In the old mountains of time.[19]

The passage, taken from Nemerov's "Guide to the Ruins," is a typical 1950s academic formalist response to the changing postwar atmosphere in America and Europe; the inward turning of the poet is palpable in this poem, and yet the self-exploration does not go far enough to shock or entertain with fresh language and rhythm. Thus postwar academic formalists such as Nemerov, Richard Wilbur, and Donald Justice preferably sought to find a compass to the trauma of survival amidst cultural chaos by exploring the historic landmarks of Europe while avoiding direct exploration of postwar American society. Robert von Hallberg explains that all American poets, formalist as well as experimental, had to face, after the Second World War, the creative dilemma of how to "hold on to the center [of culture], to profit from its energy, power, and consequence, but retain an ironic, sophisticated

18 Kenneth Koch, "*A Note on* 'Sun Out,'" in *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 3.

19 See Howard Nemerov, "Guide to the Ruins," in *The Collected Poems of Howard Nemerov* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 51.

attitude that would save them from the facile jingoism for which Americans abroad are infamous."[20] If the academic formalists chose to assume an ironic distance from what they perceived as the continuing decline of postwar western culture, the Beats chose to attack the cultural center with the formal liberation of verse and its enrichment with loose phrasing, long-line litanies, and the liberal usage of taboo subject matter and language. The New York poets such as Koch chose a third way to deal with postwar American culture in their poems—their response meant playful, experimental exploration of language, self, and form, a seemingly private discourse with considerable potential for public relevance.

Although Koch had published widely since the early 1950s, his breakthrough poetry only came with *Thank You, and Other Poems* (1962). The volume includes playful, irreverent pieces in open form, including "Fresh Air," a mid-length satire on American formalist poetry and a mock manifesto for new poetry. In the poem, Koch tells the story of an imagined Poetry Society meeting that is full of conventional poets, critics, and professors. The meeting gets disrupted by several young rebels who angrily attack the thematic stuffiness of 1950s poetry and its drab predictability: "Why should we be organized to defend the kingdom / Of dullness? There are so many slimy people connected with poetry, / Too, and people who know nothing about it!"[21] The comic presentation of the new poetry as an anthropomorphic agent that kills the proponents of the old, hackneyed literary tradition is presented in the shape of a Whitmanian catalog which playfully undermines the solemnity of the whole poetry revolution business:

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20 Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945–1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 4.

21 Kenneth Koch, "Fresh Air," in *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 122.

> You must go to the Poem Society and wait for it to happen.
> Once you have heard this poem you will not love any other,
> Once you have dreamed this dream you will be inconsolable,
> Once you have loved this dream you will be as one dead,
> Once you have visited the passages of this time's great art![22]

The tirade against mainstream poetry gets more specific in the second section of "Fresh Air," in which the poetry conservatives fight back against the rebels as Koch himself launches a long complaint about the sorry state of postwar American letters when the young poets "are gargling out innocuous (to whom?) poems about maple trees and their children, / Sometimes they brave a subject like Villa d'Este or a lighthouse in Rhode Island."[23] This explicit attack upon the postwar mainstream poets who produced unimaginative and formulaic travel poems which focused on ancient European sights and monuments is followed, in the third section, by the dramatic entry of the Strangler, a comic action-hero character whose outrageous mission is to physically get rid of any traditional poet who produces "poems addressed to Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, / To Ezra Pound, and to personages no longer living / Even in anyone's thoughts".[24] The attack on the postwar poetry world is intensified by Koch's frequent emphasis on the "freshness" that the new poetry should bring, and its absence from the mainstream poetry of the era: "Supposing that one walks out into the air / On a fresh spring day and has the misfortune / To encounter an article on modern poetry / in *New World Writing*."[25] Other conservative literature reviews, including the *Hudson Review*, *Partisan Review*, *Sewanee Review*, and *Kenyon Review*, are not spared Koch's biting tongue as epitomes of poetry produced by (and for) "these ill-contented souls" who "perhaps need air!"[26]

22 Koch, "Fresh Air," 122.
23 Koch, "Fresh Air," 122.
24 Koch, "Fresh Air," 125.
25 Koch, "Fresh Air," 125.
26 Koch, "Fresh Air," 125.

The fifth and final section of "Fresh Air" is an irreverent parody of Whitman's cosmic voice ("Blue air, fresh air, come in, I welcome you, you are an art student, / Take off your cap and gown and sit down on the chair.")[27] that Koch uses to provide a mock version of the new poetry manifesto for the unheeding conventional poets who should be replaced "before they freeze the English language to death," while Koch himself complains that the revolutionary vision of the new poetry does not come without career-threatening consequences: "One more mistake and I get thrown out of the Modern Poetry / Association, help! Why aren't there any adjectives around?" Even the mythic Strangler character, giving up on the reformist struggle, starts "reading the *Kenyon Review*!" as a sign of compliance with the poetry establishment.[28] Part of the unique flavor of Koch's comic imagination, as in "Fresh Air," lies in his ability to find "a socially acceptable form of working out his aggressions" as his anger is metamorphosed in the poem into an aesthetic stance on the new writing.[29] The gasping for fresh air, for Koch, becomes a metaphor for trying to escape the stuffiness of the American literary circles after the war.

The social commentary of "Fresh Air" is skillfully hidden beneath the comic surface and the outrageous rhetoric of the speaker and the poetry rebel characters used in the poem. Arguably, the American poetry world had to wait for another satirical take on its vices until R.S. Gwynn's "The Narcissiad" elaborated on the poetry world parody format in the early 1980s (including a mock combat between two surviving major 1970s poets whose identities are only thinly disguised in Gwynn's poem).[30] When Koch moves beyond very short lyrics into the realm of discursive poetry, as in "Fresh Air," the tone mixes the comic impulse of the entertainer with the didactic ambition of the teacher. Moreover, it seems that

27 Koch, "Fresh Air," 125.
28 Koch, "Fresh Air," 126–7.
29 See Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 213.
30 See R.S. Gwynn, *The Narcissiad*, (New Braunfels, TX: Cedar Rock Press, 1982).

Koch's comic and didactic poems are best served by the longer format of a poem that takes up to several pages, which enables Koch to showcase the full measure of his gift for performance, phrasing, and effective standup comedy peppered with serious commentary. Mark Halliday argues that Koch's poems such as "Fresh Air" are successful examples of discursive poetry in which "the poet … has a distinct topic or issue clearly in mind and strives to explore and explain it as clearly as possible, with multiple illustrations and generous rephrasings of the main idea; poems in which the desire for communication dismisses any preening desire for symmetrical neatness or tightness or antiseptic efficiency."[31] Arguably, both the short anecdotal impulse of poems such as "Sun Out" and the tendency towards discursive meditation and didacticism are present in "Fresh Air," yet the extremes of parodic treatment of American tradition and the contemporary world of poetry mean that the poem's didactic message is all but hidden.

A later example of Koch's didactic writing is "The Art of Poetry" from his collection *The Art of Love* (1975). In this modern version of Horace's classic how-to-write-poetry manual, Koch manages to put aside the tone of the comic extremist that characterized his early work (including "Fresh Air") and gives priority to the tone of solemn, lengthy didactic meditation on a traditional subject—poetry, writing, and the appropriate lifestyle for a writer: "Remember your obligation is to write, / And, in writing, to be serious without being solemn, fresh without being cold, / To be inclusive without being asinine, particular / Without being picky, feminine without being effeminate, / Masculine without being brutish, human while keeping all the animal graces / You had inside the womb, and beastlike without being inhuman."[32]. Koch's style is at once very comprehensive and down-to-earth, easily accessible yet too complex to be dismissed as mere didactic versification. As Halliday explains:

31 Halliday, "Koch and Sense," 207.

32 Kenneth Koch, "The Art of Poetry," in *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 260.

"One of the lovely things about Koch is the suave way in which he enjoys and lets us enjoy his erudition about poetry (English, Italian, French, Latin) while constantly reminding us that poetry is not (or should not be) written for the sake of dissertations, theories, or MLA panels."[33] Ultimately, in "The Art of Poetry" and other didactic pieces in the eponymous volume Koch suggests that the poet's style should be clear and easy rather than opaque and hard to understand. The poet's language, accordingly, should "be delectable always, and fresh and true."[34] Halliday explains that the poetics of "blatantly nutty opacities" of the early poems is abandoned by Koch in later meditative poems such as "The Art of Poetry," where Koch adopts a "lucid discourse" that drives the didactic agenda home with astonishing clarity, while the comic potential of the didactic poem is not abandoned.[35] Koch's achievement in poems such as "The Art of Poetry" is all the more remarkable given the domination of what Joanna Durczak calls "the psychological unease about assuming didactic roles" in twentieth-century poetry.[36] That is, in the modern and postmodern age, there has been a decline of traditional structures and beliefs, resulting in the widespread rejection of didacticism in poetry as an untenable way to reach the modern audience. Yet Koch succeeds in writing didactic poetry in an anti-didactic age where meaning, authority, metanarrative, voice, and other literary staples have been challenged by writers, critics, and readers.

In "Some General Instructions," another didactic mid-length poem on the art of living, Koch waxes philosophical while sounding neither shallow nor impenetrably deep: "Do not be defeated by the / Feeling that there is too much for you to know. That / Is a myth of the oppressor. You are / Capable of understanding life. And it is

33 Halliday, "Koch and Sense," 205.

34 Koch, "The Art of Poetry," 260.

35 Halliday, "Koch and Sense," 208.

36 Joanna Durczak, *Treading Softly, Speaking Low: Contemporary American Poetry in the Didactic Mode* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 1994), 8.

yours alone / And only this time."[37] Richard Howard noted, in an early appreciation, the ability of Koch to maintain the freshness of his poetry since he "will not submit to the familiarities and fashions of the past except in travesty."[38] A didactic review of tips on how to live properly in "Some General Instructions" is thus a parody of the didactic poem, which becomes clear in lines such as: "When you are dead, waste, and make room for the future."[39] Besides such outrageous statements, which are meant to be funny, the poem contains numerous pieces of banal advice on everyday activities, such as the frequency of putting on clean clothes, whose effect is to make fun of the serious aspects of life.

By implication, the biggest joke is Koch himself in his attitude to the didactic poem, for he lets it be known throughout his poems that the solemn mask of a preacher hides a prankster beneath. In "The Boiling Water," a banal observation about the transformation of water in a kettle ultimately changes into a serious poem about the brevity of life and mortality: "The water boils almost every time the same old way / And still it is serious, because it is boiling. That is what, / I think, one should see. From this may come compassion, / Compassion and a knowledge of nature, although most of the time / I know I am not going to think about it."[40] Koch is thus a poet opposed to the notion of suffering and pain as prerequisites for great literature. For him, "most suffering [in poetry and literature in general] dulls the spirit" and breeds thematic monotony.[41] In "The Duplications," a book-length epic and didactic poem from the 1980s, Koch discourses, among other things, on the art of poetry again:

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37 Kenneth Koch, "Some General Instructions," in *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 253.

38 Howard, *Alone with America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950* (New York: Atheneum, 1980), 334.

39 Koch, "Some General Instructions," 252.

40 Kenneth Koch, "The Boiling Water," in *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 331.

41 Halliday, "Koch and Sense," 213.

… The purpose of it?
I think I have already said, but one
Keeps asking. It is to help people love it,
Their world, I mean, which has such means to stun,
Confuse, and kick. But one can be above it
And in it all at once, it can be done
If poets do what I believe they're meant to,
I.e. the whole of what they feel give vent to.[42]

The tone is vintage Koch—refusing to be opaque and overly serious—and even this passage in which he muses on the function of writing feels clear, didactic without being overbearing, lucid to the point of banality, and yet persuasive in its gentle humor.

Besides the playful comic poem and the didactic discursive poem, a third strain in Koch's poetry, the elegiac, has come to dominate his work since the 1970s.[43] An example of mature elegiac poetry which incorporates the earlier selves and styles of the poet is the poems included in *New Addresses* (2000). Conceived as a sequence of poems dedicated to various aspects of the poet's life, the tone is a mixture of the comic and sad:

You didn't do me any good
But being with you
Was like walking up the stairs
Of a building whose attic was June
How much promise there is in the arpeggios![44]

42 Kenneth Koch, "The Duplications," in *Seasons on Earth* (New York: Viking, 1987), 227.

43 For a detailed analysis of Koch's elegiac poetry, see Mark Halliday, "'You Just Went By': Koch and Elegy," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 30, vols. 1–2 (2006): 361–88.

44 Kenneth Koch, "To Piano Lessons," in *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 598.

The painful memory of having wasted one's piano lessons in childhood becomes the subject of personal mythology and nostalgic remembrance. In "To Piano Lessons," as well as in the other poems under review here, Koch reminds us that art, as Halliday explains, "should help us enjoy life" or else what would be the point of the undertaking? Similarly, each poem "should delightfully cut through the world's confusion, it should paint in primary colors, it should energize."[45] The ability to entertain the reader and yet communicate a serious theme within the space of the same poem makes Koch a unique postwar poet, a serious comedian. It is not possible to classify the comic characters in his poems into one of the three major categories (i.e., eiron, alazon, and minstrel) as the humor in Koch's poetry typically happens on the level of language and tone.

Poetry of playful, irreverent wildness that masks deceptive complexity is something that Koch wrote well into his late career. His 1982 volume, *Days and Nights*, contains a short comic poem called "Girl and Baby Florist Sidewalk Pram Nineteen Seventy Something," a playful parody of the New York street poem with comic allusions to Whitman, Ashbery, and O'Hara:

> Sweeping past the florist's came the baby and the girl
> I am the girl! I am the baby!
> I am the florist who is filled with mood!
> I am the mood. I am the girl who is inside the baby
> For it is a baby girl. I am old style of life. I am the new
> Everything as well. I am the evening in which you docked your first kiss.[46]

After the playful title of the poem, a barebones list of concepts and observations which resembles a working entry in a writer's diary,

45 Halliday, "Koch and Sense," 210.

46 Kenneth Koch, "Girl and Baby Florist Sidewalk Pram Nineteen Seventy Something," in *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* (New York: Knopf, 2012), 389.

Koch assumes the identity of anybody and anything that is being portrayed—from a baby in a pram to the girl pushing the pram to the florist they both pass on the street to the mood attributed to the florist, who ruminates on meeting the two. Unlike Whitman, who seemed serious in appropriating the identities of other people, Koch here exaggerates the identity switching to comic effect. The docked kiss, an image to be associated with a girl's reservations about the further advances of a boyfriend, becomes a comic metaphor for something denied to the girl and florist alike, "the florist's unknown baby / He hasn't had one yet."[47] As Koch's madcap meditation on the baby, girl, and florist develops, the poet pauses to ask mock-fundamental identity questions about the three characters being portrayed:

> … Who is he? Where goes the baby? She
> Is immensely going to grow up. How much
> Does this rent for? It's more than a penny. It's more
> Than a million cents. My dear, it is life itself. Roses?
> Chrysanthemums? If you can't buy them I'll give
> Them for nothing. Oh no, I can't.
> Maybe my baby is allergic to their pores.[48]

Koch's speaker has assumed the hat of the florist. The foregrounded use of "immensely" when describing the growing up of the baby girl departs from the conventions of syntactic position and lexical use of adjectives, with the result of highlighting the ludicrous potential of language in Koch's variation on the hackneyed theme of people growing up into adulthood. The price of something to be rented, a feeling of identification with the stranger who passes by, as the florist-speaker assumes the identity of the baby and the girl in this case, is ultimately counted as equaling that of "life

47 Koch, "Girl and Baby Florist Sidewalk Pram Nineteen Seventy Something," 389.
48 Koch, "Girl and Baby Florist Sidewalk Pram Nineteen Seventy Something," 389.

itself," a bittersweet realist remark in an otherwise light-hearted poem. The complex reading of the poem is that identities may not be swapped at the drop of a coin, or with the donation of a cut flower. The realist streak goes on as the florist-speaker realizes the flowers may not be given away for nothing as everything, in New York and anywhere, has a price tag. In the final two lines, a wink at the poetics of imaginary travel to far-off places to escape the drabness of the immediate present, explored so well by Koch's friend Ashbery in "The Instruction Manual," is given by Koch. While the speaker in Ashbery's poem yearns for more contact with the people out in the street as he has to write a manual "on the uses of a new metal," in his version Koch jumps into the shoes of all the characters and mood swings he portrays: "So then the girl and her baby go away. Florist stands whistling / Neither inside nor outside thinking about the mountains of Peru."[49] The poem is vintage Koch the comedian—incorporating allusions to poet friends (Ashbery, O'Hara) and older models (Whitman), the tone is one of a mock-serious rollercoaster ride, the impact of which is a commentary on urban street culture, as well as on the isolation of the poet in the American city.

For over five decades, Koch was an unrecognized comic genius in postwar American poetry whose lyric, epic, and dramatic output, which pushed the use of language, tone, and form to new regions, inspired numerous imitators—from his friends and contemporaries John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara to younger fans such as Mark Halliday. As David Lehman explains, the winsome qualities of Koch's work have dominated its reception, as "his work is like an amusement park of the imagination, full of wild rides and spooky fun houses and a tunnel of love where the girl in braids with the cotton candy will be kissed by a handsome stranger."[50] Koch did, indeed, pave the way for a new mode in

49 Koch, "Girl and Baby Florist Sidewalk Pram Nineteen Seventy Something," 389.
50 Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 208.

postwar American poetry, that of the serious jester, a writer well-versed in poetry tradition yet wise enough to hide his serious attitude towards sharing a moral vision of the world, the place of the artist, and the art of living beneath the generous mask that his zany, didactic, and elegiac poems seem to offer.

"Reality U.S.A.": The Poetry of Mark Halliday

Comic poetry and the serious reputation of a poet do not easily mix. Charles Harper Webb explains that the division between serious and comic poetry is the legacy of the Aristotelian preference for tragedy over comedy. Consequently, when an American poet makes use of humor, that poet's literary reputation is put at risk.[1] Yet it seems that comic, not tragic, poetry makes it possible for the writer to "capture the absurdities, enormities, and pathos of 21st century life."[2] Mark Halliday (b. 1949) has been an overlooked treasure in American poetry since the late 1980s. The author of six full volumes of poetry, he has consistently produced free verse lyrics notable for their explicit yet skillful use of intelligence, and a mix of bitter and sweet voice, irony and portentousness, comedy and tragedy, sincere passion and emotion tempered with sardonic undercutting.

Webb explains that the origin of the traditional American preference for "serious" poetry over comic poetry lies in the Puritan origins of the modern American poetic sensibility: "Soul baring is encouraged, as long as the naked soul is wounded, ugly, or full of shame. If humor appears, the learned kind is much preferred, being the product of arduous years."[3] Yet Webb argues that negative emotions whose exploration has been the traditional subject of American "serious" poetry "are no more "deep" and "true" than positive ones such as happiness, confidence, delight."[4] Furthermore, it "takes considerably more depth of character to grasp the inevitability of suffering, yet laugh anyway. Good humorous poems are not *easy*."[5] Webb considers Mark Halliday a

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1 Charles Harper Webb, "Say There Was: The Serious Humor of Mark Halliday," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 22, no. 3 (2009): 285–86.

2 Webb, "Say There Was," 286.

3 Webb, "Say There Was," 286.

4 Webb, "Say There Was," 286.

5 Webb, "Say There Was," 286.

poet whose work is "serious and funny, the humor inseparable from a seriousness which, in Halliday's case, often concerns the problems of being human in the post-modern world."[6] There are two great immediate poetic models for Halliday—the older New York School poets Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara, whose playful, irreverent, iconoclastic poetry weaves the literary consciousness of the great tradition with the everyday observation of culture. Halliday himself admits to having searched for literary models for years until "around 1980 I realized that the poetry I needed to write would be fundamentally influenced by Koch and O'Hara."[7] In this chapter, Halliday's poetry will be examined for its use of humor, culture, and nostalgia.

In his first full-length volume of poems, *Little Star* (1987), Halliday explores the products of Anglo-American pop culture against the backdrop of the Romantic lyric poetry tradition of poetry as exploration of the self. As Halliday explains, while actually reviewing a book by David Kirby, in a typical poem in this mode of cultural commentary, the poet tries to "unify our inner lives by knitting together strands from different patterns of experience—the academic and the pop."[8] In "Get It Again," Halliday builds each of the poem's several stanzas around a particular year in the 1970s and a specified piece of writing accomplished that year, while the inexorable passage of time is added as "the waves roll out, and the waves roll in."[9] For all the literary pretension of Halliday in the poem, a stanza in the middle section marks his admission of being a writer who lacks direct access to the interpretation of the classic works of Western tradition: "Somewhere I read or heard something good / about what Shakespeare meant in *Lear* / when he wrote: "Ripeness is all."/ I hope it comes back to me."[10] The

6 Webb, "Say There Was," 287.
7 Mark Halliday, "Koch and Sense," *Michigan Quaterly Review* 36, no. 1 (1997): 206.
8 Mark Halliday, "Gabfest," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 26, no. 2 (2002): 204.
9 Mark Halliday, "Get It Again," in *Little Star* (New York: Morrow, 1987), 13.
10 Halliday, "Get It Again," 14.

literariness of the poet is downplayed to sound more in tune with the streetwise insider whose direct showing of any knowledge of Shakespeare scholarship would be a mark of intellectual snobbery. The sequence of unrelated earlier experiences is abruptly ended by a closure that calls attention to the cyclical nature of memory: "This poem // could go on a long time, / but you've already understood it: / you got the point some time ago, // and you'll get it again."[11] In this passage, the "it" is the meaning of an otherwise pointless sequence of disjointed memories that together constitute the poet's emotional commitment to constructing his life as a series of episodes whose meaning is purely private and personal.

Another poem which explores Halliday's own earlier writing is "Casualty Report," a wry meditation on the loss of the poet's notebook by way of reconstructing its perishable literary content: "I bought it early in 1976 to help me / hang on to everything / in my head. Thoughts, questions, lists, quotations, / doggerel, free and forced associations—."[12] In the final appeal to the reader, the loss of the notebook may finally be put to rest as the reader is asked to "make a place for it in the permanence of acknowledgment / and I can stop missing it, can feel I've signed / another truce in the endless war with the past."[13] The comic exaggeration of the title, which suggests a report on human lives being lost, is further developed with the inclusion of "a heroic battle scene on the cover" of the lost notebook, the content of which consisted mostly of unheroic, banal, everyday journal entries.

Another mode, explored over the course of Halliday's entire writing career, is the wry recollection of the experience of a naive young man that is irretrievably lost and mourned in the act of retelling. The poems of the *Little Star* volume are framed by the direct and implied use of numerous pop and rock song lyrics, including those by the Beatles, James Brown, and the Elegants.

11 Halliday, "Get It Again," 15.

12 Mark Halliday, "Casualty Report," in *Little Star* (New York: Morrow, 1987), 19.

13 Halliday, "Casualty Report," 19

The jacket of the book features a 1950s stage shot of the young Elvis Presley.

In the title poem of his first volume of poetry, "Little Star," Halliday revisits, from the vantage point of 1980, a song from his youth, a 1958 doowop recording of "Little Star," an extended version of the well-known children's ditty that became a one-off hit for The Elegants, a teenage male vocal group. The forgettable, syrupy-sweet rendition of the song becomes a point of departure for the poet's nostalgic return to his youth. Using the song as a springboard, he moves on to meditate on having grown up under the influence of popular music. The song is deemed "one of those perfect early rock/pop songs / that radiate confidence in a few / orderly truths."[14] This is ironic in the light of the hackneyed words of the song itself, a recording notable for nothing more than representing the doowop vocalization and sound of the late 1950s. The sweet voice of the singer spills onto the equally positive image of an idealized girlfriend of the poet's teenage alter ego: "if you have the right girl as your girlfriend— / you know, the one who walks that way / and tosses her hair, the one who dances / just a little between cheers at the football game— / if you've got her, you're golden, / there's nothing else you could wish for."[15] Halliday then tries the recreate "the golden liquidity / of the lead singer's voice" who is able, arguably, to "do everything with golden syllables!" Halliday is being ironic and nostalgic for the song's original time, the late 1950s, at the same time. The second half of the first section of the poem develops the ironic undercutting of the established atmosphere of positive, youthful, golden vibrations as Halliday wonders about the forgotten story of the song's protagonist: "Who was he? / Can anybody tell me the name / of the lead singer for the Elegants? / In view of that grand confidence / it would seem a name worth preserving."[16] By implication, the title song is likened

14 Mark Halliday, "Little Star," in *Little Star* (New York: Morrow, 1987), 58.
15 Halliday, "Little Star," 58.
16 Halliday, "Little Star," 58.

to the mass-produced commodity which it really was, with the singer's lost identity becoming valuable information for which the poet offers six dollars, the calculated measure of the song's nostalgic worth. The speaker offers to pay for being told the forgotten name of the group's lead singer in a gesture of cultural superiority.

In the second section of "Little Star," Halliday explains his motive for musing on a 1950s pop song in a poem, merging the lowbrow song with the highbrow expectations of poetic subject matter: "This is not the first time I've tried to / get a rock-&-roll song into a poem and it won't be / the last; it is my need to call out / *This counts too!*"[17] As a self-appointed culture critic, Halliday wants to have it both ways—to produce a poem whose lyric ambition is traditional, highbrow, and respectable, but also to explore the popular appeal of a short-lived doowop hit which is wryly juxtaposed with the undisputed highbrow cultural reputation of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Bach, Beethoven, and the Bible. Still, Halliday admits to having problems with the acknowledged collapse of traditional ways of evaluating literature and art, claiming that "we are small, / we are postmodern and small, but not therefore worthless" which makes him arrive at the conclusion that his unacademic love of a conventional pop song is justified since the song too represents "a certain addition to the long, long, / overtalented symphony of culture."[18] The real, respectable music that merits recognition as culturally significant is likened to a symphony, one of the respected forms in classical music.

In the third and final section of "Little Star," Halliday wonders some more about the present situation of the song's lead vocalist, and, by implication, about the brevity of pop music stardom: "Where is he now? / The Elegants would be in their forties now. / Is he a vice-president of Arista Records? / Is he a wise-quiet junkie

17 Halliday, "Little Star," 59.
18 Halliday, "Little Star," 59.

on the Lower East Side? / Is he dead—killed by something that golden syllables / can't fix?"[19] In a final gesture of one-upmanship, Halliday promises to "send him a fan letter" to feel, "at least for a day, that a million debts were paid."[20] The poet's funny appeal to pay six dollars for information about the singer's name is in itself ironic since The Elegants were typically known more as a group then by the names of the individual members. The tone of "Little Star" is already vintage Halliday—wry, bittersweet, ironic, able to poke fun at the folly of believing in the pop idols of one's youth.

Christopher Lasch explains that in postwar America, "to live for the moment is the prevailing passion—to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity."[21] There is a strong atemporal, narcissistic streak in the poems of *Little Star* (and in all subsequent volumes of poetry by Halliday)—the Whitmanian impulse to wax universal, objective, all-encompassing about personal experience seems missing in Halliday's wry, egocentric story of his life and the ways in which American culture has shaped it.

The postmodern decline of faith and traditional belief is dramatized in "Why the HG is Holy," as the Holy Ghost as parodic protagonist pays a fictional visit to a local library, only to come upon a book of Halliday poems that are found of interest and value. Traditional clichés about the poet's search for literary immortality are deflated: "The second poem brought a brightening of divine eyes. / And the page was turned as if by a pensive breeze. / Maybe it happened after your death, but so what? It / happened."[22] The ridiculous nature of the authorial ambition to achieve fame and recognition is exposed and satirized as the divine protagonist, or

19 Halliday, "Little Star," 59–60.

20 Halliday, "Little Star," 60.

21 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1991), 5.

22 Mark Halliday, "Why the HG Is Holy," in *Little Star* (New York: Morrow, 1987), 33.

the "HG," gets to like the poems enough to take the book "back to my perfect desk."[23]

What is wrong with the *Little Star* poems? There is a palpable lack of thematic diversity—one may be interested in only so many growing-up-as-poet poems but for a whole book, the Bildung of the poet is not a sufficient general theme. There is a deadening monotony to the *Little Star* poems—most of them are about the poet remembering his youth and college years against the backdrop of several pop music songs and artists. Halliday's narcissism is redeemed in passages of winning self-deprecation, as in "Work": "Sometimes I sit still for minutes upon minutes, / my hands doing nothing, vague noble mind seeking the cold vault / where waits the transcendental cheesecake of meaning."[24] A favorite American dessert is elevated into the realm of philosophical enquiry, the juxtaposition being both comic and realistic as the cheesecake-gobbling poet reminisces about his habitual avoidance of work. In "Western North Carolina," Halliday assumes a Richard Hugo approach towards peopling an imagined small town with fictitious characters and their stories "to create / the possibility / that someone somewhere could unpredictably and without obvious selfish motive / care for your life."[25] Yet Halliday backs off from a fully-fledged picture of a drab small town, directing the irony of failed homecoming at himself: "You'd better rise and shine, you lonesome anthropologist, / you haven't got all day."[26] "Cover Versions" is a fitting pun on the role of songs in life and on the habitual refusal of the autobiographical poet in Halliday's poems to commit himself to what he has to say about himself and others with empathy. [27]

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23 Halliday, "Why the HG Is Holy," 33.

24 Mark Halliday, "Work," in *Little Star* (New York: Morrow, 1987), 43.

25 Mark Halliday, "Western North Carolina," *Little Star* (New York: Morrow, 1987), 47.

26 Halliday, "Western North Carolina," 48.

27 Mark Halliday, "Cover Versions," in *Little Star* (New York: Morrow, 1987), 51.

A signature poem from *Tasker Street*, Halliday's second volume, is "Reality U.S.A." The speaker in the poem, who is to be confused with, as well as distinguished from, the poet, launches into a harangue about the charm of rebellious travelling across the States in search of exciting experience that would, on contemplation, translate into memorable writing:

> I feel I should go to Norfolk Virginia and drink
> gin with sailors on leave from the *Alabama*, talking
> baseball and Polaris missiles and Steve Martin movies,
> another gin with lime juice, then Balto, Balto,
> hitchhike in and out of Baltimore for days
> back and forth for days in a row discussing the jobs
> of whoever gives me rides, salesmen, shippers,
> small-time dispatchers of the much than can be
> dispatched. For the ACTUALITY of it![28]

The comic element in this poem relies on the poet's realization that his experience is the very opposite of the lively, exciting, but ultimately unattainable illusion. The "ACTUALITY" of such experience is juxtaposed with the poet's confession of his bookish removal from the physical joys of life: "Books dominate my head. I read in them, I read at them, / I'm well into my thirties. What about real life? / The woman in the light-blue skirt / on the cigarette billboard has such big thighs!"[29]

The tone of "Reality U.S.A." is a rascally, adolescent hunger for a rich, exciting, sexy experience of life that is denied even to the ageing (almost middle-aged) speaker. Having fantasized about the story of the woman from the cigarette billboard, Halliday reaches the point of imagining the favorite hobbies of her presumably blue-collar American ex-husband, the "boxing matches

[28] Mark Halliday, "Reality U.S.A.," in *Tasker Street* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 51.

[29] Halliday, "Reality U.S.A.," 51.

he goes to, and the stock-car races and—maybe I should go to Indianapolis? / But I feel sure I'd be bored in Indianapolis / despite the smoky reality of Indianapolis."[30] A word, a concept, such as "Indianapolis" here, becomes, for Halliday, a departure point for a wild ride through meaning. Subsequently, Halliday makes fun of the tradition of American writers and artists becoming enmeshed in American culture "directly: firsthand: hands-on learning."[31] The self-designed immersion program in the realities of American popular culture peaks with the dream of riding a Greyhound, the iconic American interstate bus:

> What if I were to take a Greyhound to Memphis
> quit shaving, learn to drink whiskey straight,
> lift some weights (maybe I should do the weights before I go)
> and get a tattoo on one bicep saying KISS OFF
> and meet a guy named Eddie who chain-smokes
> and rob a record store with Eddie! Yes,
> we smash the glass at 3 a.m. on Davis Avenue in Memphis
> and grab 300 albums and 600 compact discs
> pile them into Eddie's red pickup and bingo, we're gone
> in five minutes.[32]

A play on every possible cliché about the fantasies of young American males about adolescent rebellion is made here by Halliday, who quickly drops the petty thief character of Eddie and moves on to reach the American West: "Kansas City here I come. // No, skip Kansas City, I want to save Kansas City. / Just in case. / —In case what? What am I talking about? / How many lives does a person get, / one, right? And me, / I love my life with books!—"[33] The madcap tirade of the protagonist

30 Halliday, "Reality U.S.A.," 51.
31 Halliday, "Reality U.S.A.," 52.
32 Halliday, "Reality U.S.A.," 52.
33 Halliday, "Reality U.S.A.," 52.

chooses an irreverent rejection of culture outside his country: "Forget the world, just take America,"[34] while the tone of such a statement is one of satirical undercutting. The surreal journey across the United States is really a satire about the ridiculousness of the traditional American impulse to leave home in search of a better opportunity that may await beyond the horizon or of the iconoclastic and adolescent urge to escape the confines of one's family and social milieu and have exciting experiences during cross-country travel. There is a difference between the Beat worship of the road and Halliday's ironic appropriation of the impulse. Whereas the Beat characters, as in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, "were all delighted" to be "leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, *move,*"[35] the cult of perennial mobility and travel as the realization of youthful rebellion and exuberance is satirized in Halliday's road trip poem. Throughout "Reality U.S.A.," the poet fights with his inability to take part in the road trip experience while dreaming of it just the same: "Of course it's not just books, I've got bills / and friends and milkshakes, the supermarket, laundromat / oh shit but still I keep feeling this thing about / reality—"[36] The unreachable illusion then becomes Halliday's American dream, worshipped at the same time as it is being disparaged by the bookish poet whose unadventurous nature leaves him in the position of a habitual road trip dreamer.

The closure of "Reality U.S.A." brings in the theme of racial diversity and how the white male stereotyping of African-American identity may function for comic effect. In the predominantly black Georgia, the poet imagines meeting a black kid whose "uncle sells me some cocaine / or teaches me how to aim a pistol / or takes me for a ride in his helicopter— / there must be a few black men

34 Halliday, "Reality U.S.A.," 53.
35 Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (London: Penguin, 1991), 133.
36 Halliday, "Reality U.S.A.," 52–53.

who own helicopters? / Up we go roaring over Georgia!"[37] The poem ends with the speaker winking at the reader as he admits that "the components" of his crazy journey across the country "they've worn me out."[38] Halliday's poetry about the "reality" of life in the United States relies on what Tony Hoagland describes as a poetics of reducing the "most precious personal narratives" to a series of "socioeconomic-historic clichés"[39] about the Beat experience of the road trip and law-breaking as stories to be explored by the young writer. By subverting the seriousness of these clichés, Halliday actually enforces their continuing validity for himself, as well as for the subsequent generations of Americans who, too, want to grab the wheel and drive away before their family and career obligations set in.

Halliday's culture poetry, however, often fails to move, or amuse, the reader in the way its autobiographical focus on the poet as a representative man of the age who is immersed in the clash between high and low culture should. Alan Williamson considers Halliday to be a practitioner of the poetry of cynicism, an approach marked by the poet's rejection of fundamental beliefs about the function of art, family, relationships, and emotions. To elaborate this point, such cynicism in poetry engenders an insincere style in many contemporary American poets, who deny the voice of the poet the possibility of presenting a credible range of emotion.[40] In Williamson's view, the term cynicism should not be confused with "a pessimistic view of life, or a low opinion of the

37 Halliday, "Reality U.S.A.," 53.

38 Halliday, "Reality U.S.A.," 54.

39 See Tony Hoagland, "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment," in *Real Sofistikashun: Essays On Poetry And Craft* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2006), 176.

40 Alan Williamson, "Cynicism," *American Poetry Review* 35, no. 3 (2006): 39. The targets of Williamson's criticism include older surrealist poets (also dubbed the Deep Image poets) such as Larry Levis, W.S. Merwin, and James Wright, yet later in the essay, Williamson also focuses on the proliferation of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets and critics whose influence has, since the 1970s, coincided with the parallel development of "the postmodernist critique of sensibility." See Williamson, "Cynicism," 41.

possibilities of human nature"; rather, cynicism is viewed as "a lack of passion toward experience in general, a certain blaséness, combined—and this is the crucial thing—with a basic, self-mocking distrust of the possibilities of art itself."[41] Williamson ultimately faults Halliday for having a defective, snobbish sensibility that breeds immoral art. Being unable to face strong emotions, a poet like Halliday resorts to an attitude of smugness and cynicism toward his subject matter. This is what mars an otherwise powerful family tragedy poem, "The Miles of Night."[42] A televised version of a classic O'Neill play, featuring a network of fractured relationships and cruel victimization within the fictional Tyrone family, is juxtaposed with the subdued drama of the poet's own family and the ways in which the family members fail to stick together in a time of emergency (i.e., when the mother is dying of cancer, her adult sons are less than moved by this fact):

> Back from the hospital again, my mother wants us
> to share something, so we're all gathered in the downstairs den
> for *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, a TV special—
> my brother and I understand this is serious art
> and our sharing this serious art will be sharing on a high level.
> Except for the black-and-white screen, the den is dark.[43]

While the father dutifully helps his wife "get comfortable on the sofa," so that she may enjoy "serious art with my family," the poet son feels superior to the corny, yet honest wish of his parents to have the family get together and "share" the experience of watching the O'Neill classic on the parents' ageing TV set: "I should keep down this feeling because we are sharing some

41 Williamson, "Cynicism," 39.

42 See Mark Halliday, "The Miles of Night," in *Selfwolf* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3–4.

43 Halliday, "The Miles of Night," 3.

serious art / and the acting is so good."[44] The ironic dismissal of the televised play by the bored narrator and his brother reaches its climax when the next commercial break comes, which both young men quickly use to retreat into the kitchen to cut more cake and share their distaste of the whole family show played by the parents: "'Long Day's Booze into Snooze' he [the poet's brother] mutters about the serious art / but we think Mom is almost happy".[45] What makes the poem's tone so detestable is the cynicism of the speaker, who remains unmoved by the physical and emotional suffering of his mother and keeps focusing on expressions of his own annoyance with having to care for somebody else, his mother, this time. Moreover, the speaker repeatedly gives an air of feeling culturally superior to the archaic taste of his parents. On the top of the parents' too-old black-and-white TV set, "there's this brass fish, it curves / as if yearning upward," suggesting the loss of faith that was never really there, and the poet's total lack of understanding of his mother's motives for asking her family to spend time with her watching a play which features "an actress apparently admired by my parents in the past."[46] Ironically, the broken relationships of the Tyrone family that are shown on TV are mirrored by the cynical relationships of the poet and his brother with their mother and her generation, whose taste in the arts, by implication, is portrayed as vulgar and ridiculous. Williamson explains that "The Miles of Night" presents "almost a conscious anatomy of the motives for cynicism" which includes "the American disease of anti-intellectualism, often coupled with sycophancy toward pop culture."[47] The sons are put off by having to appreciate a traditional play on an ancient TV. Yet they have no contemporary replacement for the art that their parents respect. Having snobbishly disparaged his mother's wish for the family to

44 Halliday, "The Miles of Night," 3.
45 Halliday, "The Miles of Night," 4.
46 Halliday, "The Miles of Night," 4.
47 Williamson, "Cynicism," 39.

overcome their animosities and watch TV together, the speaker thus denies her the possibility of acquiring a precious new family memory. Halliday ends the poem with naive adoration of the truck driver's freedom to drive off into the night, a hollow gesture which is portrayed as cool, a typical American way to escape the poet's own family and its emotional commitments which he cannot handle:

> … and outside there's a dark highway
> and on the highway there is a truck
> and the driver of the truck for some reason
> releases two blasts of his horn
>
> into the miles of night. Image
> of courage or futility or both, and my mind prefers
> such a clean cold image to our complicated indoor warmth
> and so cherishes it for nearly a minute—"the miles of night"
> that I miss something wrenching in Act Four
> as well as something soft my mother says or doesn't say.[48]

What is particularly disgusting about this poem is Halliday's refusal to honor the wish of his dying mother, however wrong or pathetic the choice of the TV program to be watched may be. Even the content of what the mother "says or doesn't say" is devalued as a trite utterance not worthy of direct quotation by the speaker. The preference of the contemporary American poets for anything unhighbrow that Williamson complained about is clearly seen in the immature, cruel, and ridiculous image of the truck honking as a symbol of the dubious freedom that is unavailable to the poet, who feels stifled by attending a family evening that he, as the intellectual snob who is above the O'Neill type of family drama,

48 Halliday, "The Miles of Night," 4.

abhors.[49] Ultimately, the theme of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, which is being watched by the poet's family, does not matter; what matters is the cruelty of the sons' selfish refusal to honor their mother's wish, whatever private reservations they may have about her taste in art. Williamson explains that what the narrator of "The Miles of Night" and his brother are trying to escape "is not high culture, but the fact that their mother is dying."[50] In their limited range of emotional responses, which includes irony, narcissistic arrogance, masculinity, and hardness, they do not have a viable response to such a situation, so they act as self-ordained arbiters of culture and taste who dismiss their mother's choice of TV program, as well as the decoration of the TV room. The classic O'Neill play thus becomes the target of the brothers' misplaced aggression, a response whose existence is explicable, yet unforgivable. Williamson also highlights a deeper problem that poetry such as "The Miles of Night" presents. In his cynical attitude toward traditional art and the values and aesthetic and emotional responses it creates, Halliday is left with nothing.

For all the problems that Halliday's poetry generates, Williamson argues that its tone of cynicism should be contextualized as a culture-wide phenomenon rather than as the aesthetic and moral failure of an individual poet. He argues that poetry and the arts saturate the poet's mind to such a degree that he or she feels manipulated by the stories the arts and media present.[51] The manipulation and brainwashing is what the sons in "The Miles of Night" really resent, yet they are portrayed as unable to see the real story, of their mother making a pathetic attempt at human connection with them via watching the televised O'Neill play. Besides resistance to the manipulation of the individual's taste and consciousness by the mainstream media and

[49] The heavy-handed allusion to the foghorn which functions in the O'Neill play to disrupt the evening seems perhaps a coincidence rather than a conscious exploration.

[50] Williamson, "Cynicism," 39.

[51] Williamson, "Cynicism," 40.

arts, Williamson mentions another reason for Halliday's tone of cynicism, "the diffusion [of Halliday's poetry] into the general culture of academic poststructuralism."[52] If there are no master narratives in American lyric poetry any more, there can be no true feelings or authentic selves to be portrayed, and the poet's task is to navigate these chaotic waters using "language and the historical assumptions about race-, class-, and gender-hierarchy built into language."[53] The effect of poststructuralism, put into early practice by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets in the 1970s and after, upon a contemporary lyric poet such as Halliday is creative paralysis. Its effect on poetry lies in the absence of a truly persuasive lyric voice, and the rise of embarrassment, ambivalence, and cynicism about the honesty of any emotion to be portrayed within the frame of the short contemporary free verse American poem.

Charles Harper Webb claims that Halliday often does not assume sufficient distance from the subject of his satire. For example, in "Shnordink's Butterfly," Halliday moves from being autobiographical to using a ficticious self and back, creating an intentional "confusion of himself with his speakers, who may be at any time Halliday the person, Halliday the poet, someone else, or some combination of the above."[54] In this parody of the American poetry business, the reputation of an imagined contemporary poet, Shnordink, is being talked about by the speaker, a slimy influential poet whose opinion about his peers changes depending on what they say of his own work: "Shnordink said I was important? / An important clumper with enviable imaginative flair? / That's interesting. Actually, / I'm pleased to hear it, simply because / Shnordink is not an idiot (whatever his limitations); / I think he has been underestimated in some quarters. / Actually,

52 Williamson, "Cynicism," 40.
53 Williamson, "Cynicism," 40.
54 Webb, "Say There Was," 287–88.

I'm thinking of reviewing his latest."[55] Webb rightly argues that the chameleon self in Halliday's poems reflects the post-modern world as

> identity, like Truth, flits arbitrarily from place to place: a slippery, fluctuating "creature" impossible to pin down. The aesthetic and moral judgments in which people invest so heavily are hopelessly biased toward the self. Absolute truth can't be found; objectivity is impossible. Intellectuals expend enormous mental and psychic energy trying to justify rationally what are, at bottom, mere personal preferences.[56]

"My Moral Life" is another poem which poses as a serious lyric meditation on the contemporary poet while undermining this strategy with self-deprecation, or, according to Webb, which "eats its cake and drops it too."[57] In the poem, Halliday chronicles a series of moral obligations to be proposed by the poet with the full knowledge of his unwillingness to live by them: "Two years hence. When I'm ready. / After one more set of poems / about my beautiful confusion."[58] Another recent poem, "Trumpet Player," is a typical culture poem that builds on the earlier strategy of poems from the *Little Star* volume by appropriating the story of a forgotten jazz musician who thinks the commercial recording he does for a living is beneath his dignity as "I'm all deep like Coltrane

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55 See Mark Halliday, "Shnordink's Butterfly," in *Jab* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 60. Other poems on the same subject of rivalry in the world of poetry are "Loaded Inflections" and "Poetry Friendship on Earth," in *Selfwolf* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 41–45. The latter poem is really an honest autobiographical account of Halliday's poetry workshopping experience with Frank Bidart, one of his teachers and poet mentors.

56 Webb, "Say There Was," 288.

57 Webb, "Say There Was," 289.

58 Mark Halliday, "My Moral Life," in *Tasker Street* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 74.

and they're all shallow."[59] Such poetry, according to Webb, brings "serious comic entertainment. It gives its readers a colorful and fascinating character to enjoy, plus a fuller understanding of art, the slipperiness of "I," the sadness of the outsider, and the difficulty of separating *fictional* from *true*."[60] Halliday's use of the comic element "seems integral to his vision and his voice. Humor gives his poems high entertainment value. It makes them deeper, more insightful, and more serious, too."[61] While his models O'Hara and Koch used a wider range of linguistic and formal tricks, Halliday seems to have learned a lesson or two about the ways in which the poem might undermine serious assumptions about the self, culture, and life.

In Halliday's recent poetry, two new tonal approaches appear that usually mark the advent of a late stage in a poet's career—an elegiac sense of loss and grumpiness about growing old and unrecognized as an artist. Both tones mark a departure from the poetics of the culture poem as outrageous satire about the charms and hollowness of American cultural stereotypes, as in "Reality U.S.A." In *Keep This Forever*, a large section of the book includes elegiac poems about remembering the last days and death of the poet's father. Besides heartbreaking poems of moving understatement about grief and loss, Halliday also resorts to farcical undercutting of his serious subject, as in "Walking the Ashes," a tragicomic poem about Halliday trying to deepen his relationship with his recently deceased father: "I wanted to walk with him for a while— / to see how it felt to walk with his ashes / through streets he walked so vigorously in the Thirties, / the noisy exciting Thirties which were the present then // so we set out in the sunshine."[62] The madcap ploy of the poet of having a bond-affirming conversation with his

59 Mark Halliday, "Trumpet Player, 1963," in *Jab* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 47.

60 Webb, "Say There Was," 292.

61 Webb, "Say There Was," 293.

62 Mark Halliday, "Walking the Ashes," in *Keep This Forever* (Dorset: Tupelo Press, 2008), 21.

father's ashes, which are being "walked" the way dogs are walked, reaches its climax when the son chooses a restaurant to go and eat in, only to be denied his choice by the father's economizing ashes:

> A restaurant on the corner of Spring and Mott
> had Specials on a sidewalk chalkboard
> and the top Special was Salmon Affumicato with Vodka Cream
> and I said "That sounds good"
> but the ashes said "Maybe a little too fancy."[63]

The walk goes on until the son becomes worn out and calls a cab to take himself and his father's ashes back home, "because even the most vigorous walkers / with the most emphatic opinions / will eventually need a break from the world."[64] Halliday shows how the jester poet will not avoid the most painful of personal themes, including bereavement, and how it is possible to make light of the trauma of bereavement experienced by the son. Instead of giving in to grief, he chooses to celebrate the vigorous and life-loving nature of his deceased father, even if only through the conceit of discoursing with his father's urn and its contents. There are, however, also failed elegiac poems in *Keep This Forever*, such as "Last Touch," in which the poet focuses on the pain and numbness experienced by a son after his father's death. The passage is marred by improper and corny overwriting which is presented as a sorrowful response to the experience of observing the dead father's lying body:

> I was in awe of my own astonishment
> transfixed by the loud silence of the blatancy of
> my pure inadequacy in the encounter
> but I kissed his cool forehead

63 Halliday, "Walking the Ashes," 21.
64 Halliday, "Walking the Ashes," 22.

like someone saying Goodbye full of feeling
to help myself feel it later
in the icicle moments of sudden reality.[65]

This passage is so insincere and badly written that it defies analysis; the last line itself would, because of its use of fake and pretentious language and tone, deserve scorn even if shown by a participant in a writing workshop. In a 2012 interview, Halliday admits to having tapped, in *Keep This Forever*, subject matter that had not been used by the older poets who feared becoming too personal in their writing: "It's interesting to remember that people like Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, William Butler Yeats, they never wrote poems about their mother and father."[66] Looking at the above poem, (and, sadly several more mourning poems in *Keep This Forever* that also suffer from a pretentious stance, language, and overwriting the emotion and gesture being portrayed), it seems unfortunate that Halliday did not follow the modernist poets' example in avoiding painful and personal subject matter in his lyric poems.[67]

Having spent decades on poems of adolescent rebellion, Halliday has recently also adopted the tone of a grumpy old man. In "Refusal to Notice Beautiful Women," the poet tries to downplay the realization he is old by putting the blame for his blue

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65 Mark Halliday, "Last Touch," in *Keep This Forever* (Dorset: Tupelo Press, 2008), 15.

66 See Eric M.R. Webb, "Minor Things within the Major: Mark Halliday Talks Poetry," *Barely South Review* (2012): http://barelysouthreview.digitalodu.com/all-issues/winter-2012/minor-things-within-the-major-mark-halliday-talks-poetry/.

67 Another unfortunate failure of an elegiac poem from the same volume is "Milt and Sally," remembrance of the dead father's unrealized relationship with a woman from his youth, represented by a bundle of letters the father kept all his life. The son chooses to throw the letters away, and the poet spends several more stanzas on explaining the motive for this action: "So I chucked the Sally letters, unread, / because I was not God." The poem ends with a stanza cast in the voice of God, who "workshops" the letters of the two dead lovers like a writing teacher: "*a bit overcomplicated for this green and blooded world, / but a damned good read*." Mark Halliday, "Milt and Sally," *Keep This Forever* (Dorset: Tupelo Press, 2008), 17–18.

mood on others. He realizes his youth is gone and so are its related charms and excitements: "I won't keep looking up when someone comes into the café / because who cares?"[68] Even the memory of a beautiful woman smiling back at the poet back in 1967 "has become fiction, she is fictive, / and I'm off now to a very large bookstore."[69] The misogynistic withdrawal of the poet into a world of books and knowledge is contrasted with the enticements of women and the pleasure of their company that he simultaneously craves and rejects.

In this poem Jamaica functions as the unattainable dream destination for secret trysts of successful businessmen and their dates, beautiful women café-goers who are now out of the poet's league, an ego-hurting situation to which he reacts with a mock-angry diatribe: "let them go tantalize / lurching iron pumpers who wear backwards baseball caps. / Or let them go get engagement rings from suits that wear cologne, / vice presidents with tickets to Jamaica."[70] Instead of the futile pursuit of beautiful women, the poet makes the ludicrous resolution to devote the time thus saved to books and study. Yet the forced denial of the stereotypical male pleasure in observing beautiful strange women entering a café rings hollow as the intellectual substitute that Halliday takes up does not compare to the activity he has just pledged to abandon, and his pledge becomes pathetic and ridiculous: "and once I've got a tall mocha and some some slim volumes in the café / even the Michelle Pfeiffer of 1983 couldn't make me look up."[71] The speaker's tone is so nasty and socially unacceptable that it almost, but not quite, gets funny in its misogynistic transgression.

One of Halliday's recurrent themes is nostalgia about memories of the past and poetic reconstruction of past events, emotions,

68 Mark Halliday, "Refusal To Notice Beautiful Women," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 44, no. 2 (2005): 254.

69 Halliday, "Refusal To Notice Beautiful Women," 255.

70 Halliday, "Refusal To Notice Beautiful Women," 255.

71 Halliday, "Refusal To Notice Beautiful Women," 255.

and doubts associated with the speaker of his poems. In his most recent collection, *Thresherphobe*, the phobe (as someone who fears a certain thing to excess) is being "threshed" by the ultimate thresher of all humans, time, into an angry admission of his own mortality and inability to cope with what Elizabeth Bishop memorably called "the art of losing."[72] In "Talented Youth" Halliday explores an old poet's venom towards the younger generation who possess the things and qualities he has lost or never really had: "All these talented persons under thirty-five can go / fuck themselves. Just kidding, they're fine, / so human and vivacious with their little tattoos / which are slightly pathetic as self-enhancement but hey / youth has to declare itself and the important thing is // they really have talent."[73] The socially unacceptable envy of the ageing poet is balanced (although not redeemed) by his ability to laugh at his own anger, emphasizing his own relative economic prosperity that the untenured young poets do not have:

> so I guess my role pretty much should be to stand aside
> I mean I've got three times their income by now
> and I've felt the Vitamin F rush of what felt
> in a dozen weirdly brief spotlit venues like renown
> so I should adjust to being a white-haired also-ran[74]

The nasty tone of the speaker is redeemed by the ironic needle of self-deflation, as the old poet remembers once also having the

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72 In "One Art," Bishop memorably claims that "the art of losing is not hard to master," only to follow up with a series of losses of increasing levels of magnitude that leave the reader with the only possible reaction—ironic self-deprecation of the whole concept of loss, where the alternative, letting oneself be crushed by the sheer weight of the realization of loss, is clearly not an option for the self-ironizing Bishop. Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art," in *The Complete Poems, 1927–1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 178.

73 Mark Halliday, "Talented Youth," in *Thresherphobe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 76.

74 Halliday, "Talented Youth," 76.

naive ambition of youth and the brashness to write lines of obscure weirdness, such as "*Baboons of El Paso, cheerleaders of Pensacola, / tangerines flying through the soul of Des Moines, / desire is the torch in the cavern of the flimflam of time / and Savannah's guacamole will suffice in the orgy of tropes*."[75] This parody of deep image poets and their practice of the degradation of the poetic language of the 1970s ("desire is the torch in the cavern of the flimflam of time") in the midst of a Wallace Stevens kind of playful opacity underline the difference between a young poet's looking for the appropriate style and language and the old poet's problem of having lost the freshness of theme and expression.

Laurence Goldstein sums up Halliday's approach to past experience as "mournful recapitulation of the infirm contents of memory, the crazy salad of recollected experience."[76] Yet it would be a mistake to read the poems of *Thresherphobe* as autobiographical elegies. Rather, Goldstein suggests the poetry explores "fictive inventions of people young and old who may or may not share actual experiences with Mark Halliday."[77] The charm of Halliday's exploration of past experience lies in his conscious decision to become the first-hand protagonist of the experience he tries, at the same time, to ridicule in the very act of retelling. Memory, for Halliday, becomes a tool for the exploration of the hackneyed surface of experience, while nostalgia and elegy help him to keep a realistic eye on his narcissistic meditations. In "The One for Her" he admits to using this strategy: "I keep rephrasing my normal anxieties, / as if they were unusual, as it were rather witty of me / to feel them."[78] The implication is that none of the primary impulses for writing poetry seem to hold any more for

75 Halliday, "Talented Youth," 77.

76 Laurence Goldstein, "Halliday, Healy, Bidart: Remembering That Century of Youth," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 52, no. 3 (2013): 435.

77 Goldstein, "Halliday, Healy, Bidart," 436.

78 Mark Halliday, "The One For Her," in *Thresherphobe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 82.

the ageing poet, yet Halliday feels it necessary to keep on writing anyway. Williamson points out that in the wake of the postmodernist aversion to traditional meaning, form, and language in literature, American poets increasingly tend to "start with a great many reasons for believing that poetry is either marginal or a suspect art. They are encouraged to have a bad conscience both about the motives for writing and about the value, or the effects, of the product."[79] Yet, as Tony Hoagland shows, there is an identifiable grounding to Halliday's "immoral" poetry since "the danger in fashion is its lack of perspective, that it doesn't always recognize the deep structure of whatever manners it is adopting."[80] The degree to which Halliday's poetics of outrageous cliché-tackling and cynical rejection of humanist motives as (at least) sometimes good and worthy impulses for the production of poetry and art seems an important successor to the Koch-O'Hara poetry of playful surfaces and serious interior remains to be seen. In a way, Halliday has succeeded in his ability to trick his audience into accepting satire and elegy as usable ways to present the postmodern decline of traditional structures and beliefs felt by the generations of postwar Americans.

Compared to Koch, Halliday lacks his mentor's didactic dimension in poetry. He also lacks Koch's humanist attitude to the personal subject matter of lyric poetry and generosity of spirit toward his own failure as an artist to write the great book of life. ("Poetry is an escape from anxiety and a source of it as well. / On the whole, it seems to me worthwhile."[81]) Alas, Halliday does not seem to imply that poetry is a worthwhile art, considering it to be a genre for self-celebration and for putting other people down to please one's ego. Also, whereas Koch is able to wax funny about anything (including himself and his follies) in rhymed

79 Williamson, "Cynicism," 41.

80 Tony Hoagland, "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment," 187.

81 Kenneth Koch, "The Art of Poetry," in *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 264.

stanzas or heroic couplets or wacky free verse litany and surrealist jumble, Halliday remains predictably monothematic in his somber poetics of lyric egocentric cynicism in the prose poem form. Whereas Koch manages to celebrate the brevity and uniqueness of life, love, happiness, joy, and moments of intense experience with memorable language and phrasing, Halliday typically gets nasty, navel-gazing, and vicious about the facts of life, rarely aware of his limitations as a human being and poet: "I am being given my chance / and I am blowing it."[82] It might be said, then, that the long shadow cast by Koch's seriously comic oeuvre, with its humanist resonance, has not been matched by adequate development in the work of Halliday. The latter poet's one durable contribution seems to be his sweeping culture poems of youthful exuberance and rebellion, such as "Reality U.S.A.," in which Halliday's inherent cynicism is subdued in the service of the crazy road-trip-as-fulfillment theme. When the speaker of the poem asks, "How many lives does a person get, / one, right? And me, / I love my life with books!,"[83] the discrepancy between rebellion imagined and lived has never been greater. The perennial American theme of trying to break free from the bonds of family, community, and culture probably needs to be retold by each subsequent generation of American writers, if only to warn the young of the dangers of falling too easily for, and valuing too highly, the lowbrow charms of popular culture, the subject of Halliday's conscious celebration and unwitting criticism.

82 Mark Halliday, "Enchanted Field," in *Keep This Forever* (Dorset: Tupelo Press, 2008), 76.

83 Halliday, "Reality U.S.A.," 52.

R.S. Gwynn: The New Formalist Shops at the Mall

R.S. Gwynn (b. 1948), a Texas-based Southern poet and critic associated with the rise of New Formalism in American poetry in the 1980s and 1990s, has repeatedly described the legacy of modernism as a wrong turning in twentieth-century poetics. He argues that "the only new direction for poets to take is to return to some of the strategies—coherent narrative and formal regularity among them—that modernism banished to the hinterlands."[1] The argument about what Brad Leithauser calls the "metrical illiteracy" of post-1960s mainstream American confessional poets[2] and of the neglected potential of poetry that should again resume using narrative, meter, and rhyme to win back a large American audience is evident in Gwynn's 1992 essay, "No Biz Like Po' Biz," in which he concludes that American poets "are probably in for an age of poetic reaction that will rival the Augustan era in turning away from what are seen as an earlier generation's egregious mistakes," that is, the problem of American poetry and its diminishing audience might be remedied by the rejection of the plain, confessional style of the 1960s and by turning back towards "the studied artificiality of ornate stanzas and poetic diction."[3] This has really been the agenda of the New Formalist poets since the late 1970s, and one of these poets, Dana Gioia, explains what has gone wrong in American poetry since the 'sixties when he

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1 R.S. Gwynn, "No Biz Like Po' Biz," *Sewanee Review* 100, no. 2 (1992): 312.

2 See Brad Leithauser, "Metrical Illiteracy," in *New Expansive Poetry*, ed. R.S. Gwynn (Ashland: Story Line Press, 1999), 148–56. The most scathing and irrefutable indictment of the prosodic decline of post-1960s American poetry is mentioned by Leithauser on page 151 of this essay when he explains that "a great many well-known [recent and contemporary American] poets simply have not worked in form and could not successfully if they tried." This claim applies all too well to the poetry of respected poets of the past half-century who include Robert Bly, W.S. Merwin, Charles Simic, and many others who have made a virtue out of writing formless, nonmetrical verse.

3 Gwynn, "No Biz Like Po' Biz," 312.

bemoans "the debasement of poetic language; the prolixity of the lyric; the bankruptcy of the confessional mode; the inability to establish a meaningful aesthetic for the new poetic narrative; and the denial of musical texture in the contemporary poem."[4] In this chapter, an analysis of the major culture poems by Gwynn will show how a contemporary American poet who has co-shaped the formalist theater of American poetry since the early 1980s may have successfully gone against the grain by rejecting the dominant poetic mode in American writing of the last half-century and still produce a body of important writing.[5]

It would not do, however, for a poet like Gwynn to write poetry that focuses on American culture using traditional form, meter, and language, if the approach of the poet to the subject matter stayed conservative and arch-poetic and did not address the pertinent problems of living in postwar American consumer society. Gwynn's numerous poems seem prompted by first-hand experience of the American intellectual whose classical education and highbrow sensibility as a scholar, critic, and translator grapple with the other part of his personality, which includes a love of visits to the drive-in cinema, countless hours of watching TV, shopping at the local mall, and thinking about what went wrong with postwar America and its shaken idealism and mythology. To the lowbrow part of his sensibility, Gwynn adds ironic distance that a thorough grounding in English and foreign traditional poetry enables him to assume. Bruce Bawer sums up

4 Dana Gioia, "Notes on the New Formalism," in *New Expansive Poetry*, ed. R.S. Gwynn (Ashland: Story Line Press, 1999), 27.

5 Other important formalist postwar American poets who did not embrace the 1960s repudiation of form in American poetry include Richard Wilbur, Howard Nemerov, Anthony Hecht, and Donald Justice. The younger generation (sometimes nicknamed "New Formalists") includes Timothy Steele, Dana Gioia, Brad Leithauser, Mary Jo Salter, Wyatt Prunty, Robert McPhillips, Annie Finch, Meg Schoerke, and many others. The choice of Gwynn for the present chapter was made mainly because his work is all of a piece, formalist, intelligent, yet also very diverse, multithematic, polytonal, comic, satiric, and ultimately suitable for the present analysis of culture and humor in postwar American poetry.

the recurring themes of Gwynn's poetry as including "the decay of Western civilization—trash culture, fashionable politics, education made E–Z—and the enduring faults, frailties, fallacies, foibles, and fraudulencies of the human comedy."[6] R.S. Gwynn is, indeed, a rare poet whose love of postwar American popular culture is combined, in the poems, with his satirical wit and prosodic mastery that seems unsurpassed among the writers of his generation. Lewis Turco, a teacher and mentor to Gwynn, spotted the latter's talent early on, claiming Gwynn was "constitutionally incapable of writing in anything but rhymed and metered verse," but that Gwynn is not to be straitjacketed into strict observance of traditional form applied to limited subject matter. Rather, he "may bemuse readers unfamiliar with his work to discover that he is also, without a doubt, a truly experimental poet, the cleverest and most daring of the new generation of poetic traditionalists."[7] In postwar American poetry, only X.J. Kennedy (b. 1929) and Lewis Turco (b. 1934) seem to be equal to Gwynn's diverse formalist poetry, which incorporates elements of classical education in the arts together with a fascination for contemporary popular culture in poetry that utilizes elements of comedy, satire, light verse, parody, and social commentary.

A major early poem by Gwynn which established his reputation as a formalist poet who defies the mainstream literary trends in postwar America is "The Narcissiad," published in 1981 as a chapbook. It is a poem which makes a witty yet vicious attack upon many established American poets, critics, and editors. Gwynn chose the simple-looking yet supremely difficult form of the heroic couplet, which was last memorably used for satirical purposes by Alexander Pope.[8] Through the story of Narcissus, a

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6 Bruce Bawer, "Borne Ceaselessly into the Past," *Hudson Review* 54, no. 3 (2001): 513.

7 Lewis Turco, "R.S. Gwynn: A Southern Melancholic," *Hollins Critic* 39, no. 1 (2002): 1–14.

8 For example, see Pope's "Essay on Man" and "Essay on Criticism." In the degree of vitriol used towards his literary enemies, however, Gwynn seems to have no

younger-generation American poet and careerist in the poetry business world of the 1970s, Gwynn satirizes the artistic decline of postwar American poetry, the cult of nepotism, and other ills that have plagued American literary culture in recent decades.[9] The protagonist, aptly introduced as an egomaniac poet whose inspiration comes from constant self-observation, preening, and advanced study of "the gospels of the Self," is shown as being ignorant of literary tradition and shallow in terms of knowledge about life and literature that exists beyond his navel. The poetry of his, then, "no more requires / A love of words or knowledge of the past / Beyond the headlines of the Tuesday last".[10] Gwynn's Narcissus, however, is the quintessential younger postwar American poet of the 1960s and after—the star child of the age when many American poets turned their gaze from social concerns to exploring their private woes in the manner pioneered earlier by Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. Subsequently, the 1970s marked an era of canonization of the confessional free verse prose poem that held on to confessional subject matter as its primary focus. Gwynn's 1970s Narcissus thus becomes "Confident in his art, he knows he's great / Because his subsidy comes from the State / For teaching self-expression to the masses / In jails, nut-houses, worse, in grad-school classes".[11] The widespread practice of friendly poetry reviewing and other aspects of the literary world are brought up as Narcissus "has no fear, for when his work's reviewed / Friends do it; thus, he's never

equal (which in turn may explain the fact that his work has been ignored by critics unless they have been the poet's friends from the generation of Formalists and New Formalists).

9 Looking at a recent interview with R.S. Gwynn, it seems ironic that all the cronyism and nepotism that gets attacked in "The Narcissiad" is gladly practiced by the author of the poem himself in turn. See "R.S. Gwynn," in *Twenty-First-Century American Poets*, ed. John Cusatis (Detroit: Gale, 2013). *Literature Resource Center*. Accessed January 3, 2014.

10 R.S. Gwynn, "From *The Narcissiad*," in *No Word of Farewell: Selected Poems 1970–2000* (Ashland: Story Line Press, 2001), 107.

11 Gwynn, "From *The Narcissiad*," 108.

gotten screwed."[12] Having introduced the figure of the American Narcissus, Gwynn spends several pages on a scathing summary of the role models that were available to the young American poet in the 1970s—from Lowell and Plath, to start on a confessional note, to O'Hara, "whose punch / Lands on such subjects as his bank and lunch," finally exposing the emptiness of a diet of criticism by Vendler and Bloom, before being "corseted into a straitjacket like Harry / Houdini, he is force-fed with Ashbery, / Merwin's new work, Kinnell's, Levine's, or Bly's / Until his doctors state with downcast eyes / That nothing will avail; thus, they are sure / His case lies quite beyond all hope of cure."[13] Ultimately, the education of Narcissus the young American poet is complete with his admission of sanity as he naively declares that "relative to his peers, / He's sane as any: if he perseveres / In writing he will someday soon be found / As sound as Blake, as Clare, as Schwartz, as Pound."[14] Having won the battle of the poets for supremacy in the world, Narcissus "rises from the fray / As sole survivor, victor of the day / Since all his rival poets lie below,"[15] and the vanquished camps include all the postwar schools in American poetry from the Beats to the ethnics. The ultimate victory of the American Narcissus is, however, shattered by Zeus, who is awakened from his sleep by the unbearable show of the young poet's poetic egotism and angrily kills the human as "from his hand a million volts / Of lightning sizzle forth in crackling bolts / That cloak Narcissus in a greasy smoke."[16] Moreover, the divine punishment of Narcissus means the latter is cast in the horrific likeness of a monster which "now rears its hoary head," having received the trademark features of several famous poets of both sexes from Auden to Edith Sitwell.

12 Gwynn, "From *The Narcissiad*," 109.
13 Gwynn, "From *The Narcissiad*," 110.
14 Gwynn, "From *The Narcissiad*," 110. The irony of reading this list of English and American poets lies in the fact that all of them were institutionalized for insanity.
15 Gwynn, "From *The Narcissiad*," 118.
16 Gwynn, "From *The Narcissiad*," 124.

Gwynn's brutal satire on the world of American poetry highlights the inadequacy of the conscious rejection of intelligence and versification by the younger generations of American poets in the 1970s whose preference for the confessional prose poem form seemed limiting and hackneyed to any poet who was not willing to discard their grounding in rhyme, meter, and narrative.

In another important early poem, "Among Philistines," Gwynn uses the language of an American couch potato to explore the biblical story of Samson and Delilah and place it under the scrutiny of American journalism.[17] The poem, published in *The Drive-In* (1986), is a 1980s parody of the tragic story of the biblical hero Samson, who first defeats the Philistines as a favorite of God, but is then tested and ultimately betrayed by the seductions of the beautiful but treacherous Delilah. As a punishment for giving in to Delilah's blandishments, Samson is given up to his enemies, who blind him. In Gwynn's update of the tragic ending of Samson, the story becomes a "heartfelt evocation of a fallen and thus doomed man wrapped inside a scathing indictment of American consumerism."[18] The Samson in Gwynn's poem is still the same hero from the Book of Judges who defeated the Philistines, yet his story gets discussed by the tabloid press and in TV celebrity reports:

> The night before they meant to pluck his eyes
> He caught his tale at six on Action News—
> Some blow-dried moron blabbing the bald lies
> The public swallowed as "Official Views."[19]

The poem's form is traditional—pentameter lines, stanzas with alternating end rhymes. What makes the poem special is Gwynn's

17 For the biblical story, See *King James Bible*, Judges 16:1–16:21.

18 Dana Gioia, introduction to *No Word of Farewell: Selected Poems 1970–2000*, by R.S. Gwynn (Ashland: Story Line Press, 2001), 11.

19 R.S. Gwynn, "Among Philistines," in *No Word of Farewell: Selected Poems 1970–2000* Ashland: Story Line Press, 2001), 128.

use of language. He expertly navigates between neutral description, as in the first line, to the crude vulgarity ("blow-dried moron") of the third, which implies the degree of the protagonist's anger. The American Samson's identity is defined by the sensationalist coverage of his story by the tabloid press and TV, while Gwynn's Delilah is updated to become a contemporary Hollywood starlet who will do anything to get ahead ("Complaining what a pittance she was paid / She plugged the film she starred in in the nude.") Samson's original trysts with Delilah are documented by "Sheba Sleaze, the columnist," only to be sold later "in lurid paperback."[20] The Samson and Delilah story thus becomes the focus of contemporary tabloid exploration of celebrity soundbites and invented dramas from their lives. As Samson is led to receive his punishment for having given in to Delilah and thus having betrayed God, the Gaza location of the biblical story becomes thoroughly Americanized in Gwynn's satirical update:

> So, shorn and strengthless, led through Gaza Mall
> Past shoeshop, past boutique, Hallmark, and Sears,
> He held his head erect and smiled to all
> And did not dignify the scene with tears[21]

Gwynn's rendition of the punishment stops with Samson's stoical reaction to the physical ordeal of being blinded by "twin picks" that "hissed in his eyes."[22] Here Gwynn enriches the biblical tragedy of Samson's blinding with another layer of meaning as the American Samson who indulges in watching TV and mall-shopping says "Good riddance" to the impending loss of his sight. To the American, such blindness will, besides being God's punishment on Samson, prevent future consumerist binges at the mall or more angry reactions to the content of TV celebrity

20 Gwynn, "Among Philistines," 128.
21 Gwynn, "Among Philistines," 130.
22 Gwynn, "Among Philistines," 130.

news broadcasting and glossy magazine advertising. The Samson among the American Philistines, like his biblical model, prays to God for forgiveness, and yet Gwynn's dark treatment of the tragic downfall of Samson is punctured with quips about the indifferent Lord of pop culture "whose name cannot be used / Promotion-wise, whose face shall not adorn / A cornflake box"—the traditional figure of Christian worship is devalued by being placed within the discourse of product advertising and marketing.

The Samson of "Among Philistines" is a scathing satire that merges the identity of the tragic biblical hero with that of an unheroic American TV viewer, shopper, and consumer of half-baked media truths. There is one more element of the Gwynn poem that elaborates its critical message about postwar America—a vigorous attack upon the corruption of the language by the American media. George Orwell once claimed that: "The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink."[23] In "Among Philistines," Samson becomes disgusted with the fake confessions of Delilah to the press, and reacts angrily to the televised commodification of his story by changing the TV channel, yet the nightmare of vulgar advertising copy that appropriates his strongman image for the sensation-hungry lowbrow American audience does not go away: "The glossy covers of their magazines / With taut chains popping on his greasy chest, / The ads for razors with the corny scenes / And captions: *Hebrew Hunk Says We Shave Best!*"[24] Samson's hair is thus shaven using the very best product that the American market offers. Following Samson's train of thought about his own imminent blinding, a haunting image of the modern Delilah and her shaving action is portrayed as mild pornography: "Delilah, naked, sucking on a pair / Of golden

23 George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," *Horizon* (1946): 262.

24 Gwynn, "Among Philistines," 129.

shears, winking her lewdest smile, / Amid a monumental pile of hair // And blaring type: *The Babe Who Buzzed the Yid!*"[25] The corrupt, insincere, overblown language of advertising becomes the register for Gwynn's update of the biblical story, portraying Samson's suffering and Delilah's depravity with a mixture of fascination and disgust. While Gwynn makes Samson the victim of Delilah's irresistible charms ("Her perfect breasts, her hips and slender waist"), he also allows his identity to be masterminded by the media reporting and advertising. Gwynn ultimately presents the American Samson as a defiant man who finally accepts the divine punishment ("the blessing in disguise") for his naiveté. Philistines, in the Gwynn poem, are conventional American consumers and media people who drive an honest man like Samson to his literal and figurative downfall.

Gwynn's fine sensibility as a satirist is evident even in more recent work. "My Agent Says" mocks the typical American habit of consulting a specialist on any imaginable aspect of life. The repetitive effect of rhymed pentameter quatrains is enhanced with the alliterative beginning of each line with a "My," followed by a catalog of specialists who define the life choices of the protagonist:

> My agent says Los Angeles will call.
> My broker says to sell without delay.
> My doctor says the spot is very small.
> My lover says get tested right away.[26]

While the poem goes on for seven more quatrains that give abundant detail about the joys and woes of the protagonist, his family, and friends, a sardonic attitude to the advice given by each specialist is evident: "My congressman says yes, he truly cares. /

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25 Gwynn, "Among Philistines," 129.

26 See R.S. Gwynn, "My Agent Says," in *No Word of Farewell: Selected Poems 1970–2000* (Ashland,: Story Line Press, 2001), 18.

My bottle says he'll see me after five."[27] Lines from the workplace ("My boss says that I'd better take a chair.") are juxtaposed with the growing-up stage of the protagonist's life ("My father says he doesn't like my face.") The first and last lines of the poem, which focus on a craved call from Hollywood, are a joke on every fledgling writer's fantasy of being commissioned by a film studio. From the sure tone of the first line, "Los Angeles will call," Gwynn moves toward a less confident closure in the last as the agent's promise acquires a tinge of doubt and non-committance: "My agent says Los Angeles may call."[28] Overall, the poem posits a bittersweet image of a writer's life condensed into forty banal yet telling statements framed by the agent or specialist adviser on every aspect of the protagonist's existence. The list of specialists, interestingly, includes the poet's lover, teacher, first love, dog, pastor, coach, and his own God.

The commercialization of American education and the loss of prestige that increasingly plagues advanced study is satirized in another recent poem, "The Classroom at the Mall." The speaker is a literature professor whose bitter meditation on the futility of reading classic works of literature in a class of fast-track adult students who need easy course credits for professional advancement is not so much a professorial nightmare as American reality:

> Our Dean of Something thought it would be good
> For Learning (even better for P.R.)
> To make the school "accessible to all"
> And leased the bankrupt bookstore at the mall
> A few steps from Poquito's Mexican Food
> And Chocolate Chips Aweigh. So here we are—[29]

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27 Gwynn, "My Agent Says," 18.

28 Gwynn, "My Agent Says," 19.

29 R.S. Gwynn, "The Classroom at the Mall," in *No Word of Farewell: Selected Poems, 1970–2000* (Ashland: Story Line Press, 2001), 25.

The ultimate postwar American temple, the suburban shopping mall, becomes the place where university education becomes a marketable service in order to compete for the buyers' money alongside chocolate shops, doctor's offices, and lingerie stores. In Gwynn's mall, people come to attend college courses, "shopping" for the knowledge of literature alongside the more traditional attractions of postwar American consumer culture. A motley assortment of students attends Gwynn's course taught at the mall branch of the campus, including housewives and workers in their mid-careers, who meet with their teacher "for our final class while Season's Greetings / Subliminally echo calls to buy / Whatever this year's ads deem necessary / For Happiness and Joy."[30] The placement of a college classroom within earshot of shopping music and the din created by numerous Christmas (or winter break, to be politically correct) shoppers passing by highlights the shattered notion of ivory-tower isolation that used to be associated with the serious study of great literature. An added irony is Gwynn's emphasis on the secular cult of compulsive shopping at this time of year, intensified through the introduction of the effigy of the Virgin Mary that is positioned just outside the classroom in the mall corridor and is imagined to "audit our last meetings," adoring "her infant with a glassy eye."[31] An atmosphere that favors scholarship and fosters intellectual curiosity is not exactly the norm in the shopping mall environment portrayed in the poem. Rather, the placement of the seminar room in the middle of a row of shops serves as a lowbrow intrusion upon the effort of the class to understand the testaments of highbrow literature. Even the shopping mall music outside the classroom makes the concentration of the teacher and his students upon the lofty readings of the course difficult:

30 Gwynn, "The Classroom at the Mall," 25.
31 Gwynn, "The Classroom at the Mall," 25.

Descend, O Muzak! Hail to thee, World Lit!
Hail, Epic ("most of which was wrote in Greek")
And hail three hours deep in Dante's Hell
(The occupants of which no one could spell)—
As much as our tight schedule might admit
Of the Great Thoughts of Man—one thought per week.[32]

The creeping intrusion of pleasurable shopping music (represented by the ironic homage to the Muzak system for the provision of recorded music) is likened to divine intervention in the course proceedings. The pinnacles of Western literature and philosophy, from the Greek epics to Dante's *Inferno*, are mentioned as examples of impenetrable, highbrow discourse whose study by the students is complicated by the unliterary environment of the classroom's position in the mall. The professor adapts to the commercial feel of the place as he, too, comes to simplify the difficult interpretations of the classics and to translate the teaching activity into terms of financial profit:

… They take their quiz
While I sit calculating if I've made
Enough to shop for presents. From my chair
I watch the Christmas window-shoppers stare
At what must seem a novelty, and is,
This Church of Reason in the Stalls of Trade—[33]

The commercial debasement of university education could hardly be more comic. In the next stanza, another intrusion from the outside world of the mall is introduced as lovable curious blonde twin girls "press against the door" of the classroom, only to be taken away by their annoyed mother, who "tiredly spells out for

32 Gwynn, "The Classroom at the Mall," 25.
33 Gwynn, "The Classroom at the Mall," 26.

them the reason / I am not price-tagged as befits the season"[34] before taking her innocent children back to the more digestible world of material shopping. Gwynn then imagines himself to be called an "animated dummy" in the mother's translation of his teaching position and activity for her curious children. The protagonist considers himself to be "an academic Santa Claus," a generous giver of presents to all the students who come his way. Yet there is an ironic moment as a slow-witted student "declares she has enjoyed the class: "They sure had thoughts, those old guys," she begins," which really validates the teacher's half-baked teaching as important and useful. After the final literature test is administered in the midst of the Christmas shopping craze that surrounds the classroom, the teacher is relieved to have the job over and done with, having earned his share for the day, "With time to spend and promises to keep / And not one "hidden meaning to the tale,"" only to merge with the buzz of happy, unliterary crowds of teenage shoppers outside the classroom, parading with "License and credit bulging in their jeans, / Who circle, hungry for the choice and cheap— / Something of value, soon to go on sale."[35] What is offered on sale at Gwynn's imagined mall, by implication, is the history of privileged social status attributed to advanced humanities education, simultaneously devalued by its juxtaposition with the cheap material products on sale in the neighboring mall units. While American malls have traditionally been about shopping and entertainment, the more recent addition of various service shops, which even include a university classroom whose location is convenient for mall-visiting students, adds a new meaning to the American quest for getting the best value for money.[36] James Howard Kunstler explains that the American shopping mall "commercialized the public

34 Gwynn, "The Classroom at the Mall," 26.

35 Gwynn, "The Classroom at the Mall," 27.

36 For an explanation of the consumerism and entertainment appeals of shopping malls to the American public, see LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History*

realm," with schools following the pattern of postwar American development that favored even educational services being located "on the suburban fringe in the form of a mall."[37] Gwynn's literature course at the mall is a thoroughly economical proposition whose negative effect upon the intellectual independence associated with higher education has been ignored in the interest of fast-track education whose aim is to secure profit for all parties involved (from the university administration to teachers to students).

Gwynn is a master of fixed forms. Among the more common forms he has favored is the sonnet. In the Gwynn sonnet, the traditional thematic pattern of love or metaphysical content is put aside. In "Body Bags," a series of three sonnets, Gwynn portrays three acquaintances from the 1960s who failed to become model soldiers.[38] "At the Center" dramatizes the struggle of cancer clinic patients to fight their condition with bemused understatement: "Rumors you've heard of rumors from these floors— / How some guests never leave, how they display / A preference for short hair, or none at all, / How no one asks how long you plan to stay."[39]

In a recent poem, "Baseballade," Gwynn collected several numbered stanzas addressing shared memories of a popular American team sport and its nostalgic, private meaning for a fan. It ends with a quatrain by a chorus, a game of baseball completed becoming a metaphor for life nearing its end:

So let us rest, our bases run.
Shall flaws outlive us? God forbid.

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of American Popular Culture Since 1830 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 441–42.

37 See James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 119.

38 See R.S. Gwynn, "Body Bags," in *No Word of Farewell: Selected Poems, 1970–2000* (Ashland: Story Line Press, 2001), 28–30.

39 See R.S. Gwynn, "At The Center," in *No Word of Farewell: Selected Poems, 1970–2000* (Ashland: Story Line Press, 2001), 69.

Remember seasons in the sun.
Remember us for what we did.[40]

Gwynn, as has been shown, is a poet who has worked exclusively in fixed forms, yet the formalist limitations he chose to embrace in the 1970s when writing metered verse went against the grain of mainstream American poetry in the Beat, confessional, and deep image surrealist modes have allowed him to explore a remarkable range of subject matter, from nostalgia for the past to criticism of the heedless consumerism of postwar America. Ever the moralist, Gwynn views the American identity as jointly defined by the embrace of things materialist, commercial, loud, and vulgar, as in "1–800." This poem, titled after the ultimate symbol of a toll-free phone service to customers and/or prospective buyers, seems a fitting commentary on the dominance of American TV advertising, which repeatedly prompts the viewer to pick up the phone and place an order at the given toll-free number. The poet, cast in the role of insomniac viewer, "sinks deeply in his chair," hoping to experience "bright visions from the midnight air"[41] of nocturnal TV broadcasting. He keeps sipping brandy, but his initial enthusiasm for the products being advertised ("The six-way drill! The eight-way folding ladder!"), portrayed as divine products "made of stuff no earthly force can shatter!", changes into sobering anger and disgust at realizing he has been lured by the ads into buying their message, and the experience makes him feel used and tricked: "His hopes, ephemeral as stir-fried food, / Vanish like screws his six-way drill has tightened, / Leaving him just like them—completely screwed."[42] Yet the anger of the couch potato protagonist is short-lived as he goes on to drown any resistance to the promise of the ads in subsequent glasses of

40 R.S. Gwynn, "Baseballade," in *Dogwatch* (Evansville: Measure Press, 2014), 90.

41 See R.S. Gwynn, "1–800," in *No Word of Farewell: Selected Poems, 1970–2000* (Ashland,: Story Line Press, 2001), 20.

42 Gwynn, "1–800," 20.

brandy until "all softens in an amber hue; / As through a pair of UV/blue-block glasses, / Doubt fades before the testimony— true / Accounts of hair sprouting like jungle grasses!"[43] The mock-exultation at the exciting catalog of miraculous products not to be missed goes on as the poet

> … fights off slumber
> The moment that his head begins to nod
> And resolutely punches the first number
> Of what may be the area code of God.[44]

By attributing divine status to the hackneyed symbol of a toll-free commercial phone line, Gwynn exposes the commercial side of American culture as symptomatic of the fall from Eden, a step taken by the erring humans who chose the worship of the material over proper faith and emphasis on spiritual fulfillment in their lives. Gwynn, in his poetry, is thus a covert moralist, a mask whose presence may not be so palpable in the context of his dominant tone of satirical commentary on American identity and culture. Gwynn's America is depraved, vulgar, weak, and pathetic in striving for satisfaction, yet in the very act of satirical exposure Gwynn finds a way to celebrate its humanity.

A recent poem, "348 S. Hamilton, 27288," presents a moving inventory of items left behind in the house of a recently deceased woman. The anaphoric lines do not provide a laconic list of memories; rather, they create a moving image of a typical American family household seen through the family album and several beloved objects. The elegiac tone is something new in the satirist's bag of tricks.[45] Developing the parallelism of flat statements that was seen earlier in "My Agent Says," the poem describes the items left by a deceased woman:

43 Gwynn, "1–800," 21.

44 Gwynn, "1–800," 21.

45 Gwynn's latest volume, *Dogwatch*, contains several elegies to the poet's friends.

Here is a life to clear away.

Here are a mother and a child.
Here are forms filled out and filed.

Here is an album of photographs.
Here is a pretty girl who laughs.
Here are heights and weights on graphs.
.....
Here is the chest where treasures are.
Here is the sign that hung on the car.
Here is a page from the calendar.
Here is an "It's a boy" cigar.
Here are coasters from a bar.
Here is the tinfoil Christmas star.[46]

In this poem, Gwynn's formal virtuosity is foregrounded, yet remains unobtrusive as he structures the poem into tetrameter lines and monorhyme stanzas whose length first progresses from one to six lines, then again diminishes down to one, coming to the ruthless repetition of the first line: "Here is a life to clear away." The stanzaic structure mimics the course of human life from childhood memories to adulthood family items to old age solitude and ultimate demise. Each line celebrates a treasured memory, object, or photograph. Overall, Gwynn's later work assumes a more elegiac quality to counterpoint his satirical wit. Another elegy is "Antiville," in which the suburban idyll is portrayed with the omnipresent prefix that makes the meaning of the lifestyle being portrayed ambiguous:

46 R.S. Gwynn, "348 S. Hamilton, 27288," in *Dogwatch* (Evansville,: Measure Press, 2014), 10.

In the antistreets the flowers grow
And the dirt is bare on antilawns
Where antigardeners sometimes mow
The anthills, stifling antiyawns.[47]

The strategy of the absolute negation of all the concepts in the poem is finally transferred to a stanza which deals with the role of art in suburban America:

And the only antithesis? Antiart,
Which is antinomic, thus twice as rare,
And anticipates every antiheart
And animates all the souls who care.[48]

The suburban satirist thus finds an angle from which to approach the decline of American culture with, taking a place "in an antique chair" which allows him to be "venting his animus everywhere— / Antic anthems of antibullshit."[49]

From "Among Philistines" to "Antiville," Gwynn has adhered to the poetics of a satirical worldview in which the human protagonists of his poems are laughable, fallen beings who, nonetheless, deserve sympathy as their shortcomings, by implication, dramatize the private woes of the average postwar American. An added bonus has been Gwynn's diverse deployment of traditional (as well as nonce) meters and poetic forms, with his exciting if ambivalent use of language that incorporates the stilted diction of formal speech along with four-letter words. In "Bloodwork," a deceptively powerful villanelle about one's fear of blood test results becomes a metaphor for life and the random yet inexorable ways in which it shapes human destiny:

47 R.S. Gwynn, "Antiville," in *Dogwatch* (Evansville: Measure Press, 2014), 42.
48 Gwynn, "Antiville," 43.
49 Gwynn, "Antiville," 43.

And then, for once, you'll win a game
With rules that no one seems to know
You hope your numbers are the same.
You wait your turn. They call your name.[50]

In Gwynn's poetry, form is an integral presence that, with the help of fresh language, enables a powerful revelation of content to take place, from the young poet's comic narcissism to the old professor's witty spells of elegiac sympathy.

[50] R.S. Gwynn, "Bloodwork," in *Dogwatch* (Evansville: Measure Press, 2014), 105.

Campbell McGrath: The Poet as a Representative Product of American Culture

"Am I a stooge of the popular culture machine?"[1] wonders Campbell McGrath (b. 1962) in "The Bob Hope Poem," a major early 1990s attempt at a long poem about American history, the cult of celebrity, and his own life. This chapter attempts to answer the poet's rhetorical question by means of thematic and rhetorical analysis of his early poetry, its achievement and failure to portray recent and contemporary American popular culture, and its use of humor.[2] Since the late 1980s, McGrath has been writing unrhymed lyrics, prose poems, and, occasionally, also formal poems, in a voice that oscillates between the comic and serious, lowbrow and highbrow, involvement and disengagement. His ambition has been high—to build on where Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, and Robert Pinsky left off in terms of poetry that promises to give a sweeping portrait of America in all its complexity at a given point in time. In an interview with Dallas Crow, McGrath claimed that he attempts "to write about recurring themes—America, popular culture, my life."[3] Regarding this approach, he feels satisfied with the results of his culture poems which, he thinks, allow him "to incorporate history, sociology, anthropology at pretty much whatever level I want."[4] This is an admirable ambition, yet its adoption may, while providing a useful mode to write in, also breed problems as regards the tone and voice of his poetry. McGrath, through the medium of his poems, attempts to make sense of the changeable landscape of American culture and history and the identity of the individual within a

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1 Campbell McGrath, *Spring Comes to Chicago* (New York: Ecco, 1996), 46.

2 The survey in this chapter includes the first four full-length books by McGrath, *Capitalism* (1990), *American Noise* (1993), "The Bob Hope Poem," included in *Spring Comes to Chicago* (1996), and *Road Atlas* (1999).

3 Campbell McGrath, interview by Dallas Crow, *Bomb* 46 (1994): 55.

4 McGrath, interview by Dallas Crow, 55.

sociocultural framework that may be, as a theme for poetry, at once too overwhelming, contradictory, and elusive.

The first full-length poetry book by McGrath, *Capitalism* (1990), already shows a wide range of stylistic and thematic diversity. One of the early critics, Dallas Crow, considered McGrath to be an important poet who makes unique use of "our cultural accoutrements and language, not in some dead-end depiction of an uninspired generation, but to reflect on American history."[5] What follows is an extended analysis of the major poems in *Capitalism*. The first mode of poetry included in the book is the short, anecdotal lyric poem marked by a would-be personal tone and the presence of a speaker who is identifiable as the author. "Capitalist Poem #5" is a typical example:

I was at the 7–11.
I ate a burrito.
I drank a Slurpee.
It was late, after work—washing dishes.
The burrito was good.
I had another.

I did it every day for a week.
I did it every day for a month.

To cook a burrito you tear off the plastic wrapper.
You push button #3 on the microwave.
Burritos are large, small, or medium.
Red or green chili peppers.
Beef or bean or both.
There are 7–11's all across the nation.

5 McGrath, interview by Dallas Crow, 54.

On the way out I bought a quart of beer for $1.39.
I was aware of social injustice

in only the vaguest possible way.[6]

The language of the poem is flat, unpoetic, and everyday. The theme is the common experience of many young Americans with part-time manual work. Geoffrey Leech argues that the successful poet should avoid banality of language "on two dimensions: the banality of the poetic convention of the past; and the banality of the everyday usage of the present."[7] "Capitalist Poem #5," unfortunately, avoids neither type of linguistic banality, representing the easily likeable, down-to-earth idiom that seems to enable McGrath to become the poetic spokesman of the young who prefer to avoid any explicit allegiance to the literary and cultural traditions of their academic predecessors in an effort to beat TV and the media in a fight for the attention of their audience. Allan Williamson explains this adoration of American consumerism and pop culture as the effects of the traditional anti-intellectualism of many Americans, including poets, who have started to prefer a culture of instant gratification, in writing as in life, at the expense of exploring the traditional works of great literature and art.[8] Joel Brouwer admits to having been fascinated by this very instant likeability of McGrath's early poetry, which, to the writers and critics of his generation, represented the forbidden fruit of "what our professors called popular culture, but which for us was simply, for better or worse, *the* culture: ZZ Top, the Flintstones, K-Mart, and *The Price Is Right*."[9] The situation being

6 Campbell McGrath, "Capitalist Poem #5," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 8.

7 Geoffrey N. Leech, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1969), 24.

8 Alan Williamson, "Cynicism," in *American Poetry Review* 35, no. 3 (2006): 39.

9 Joel Brouwer, "Accordion Music and Raw Profusion," *Parnassus* 26, no. 2 (2002): 170.

portrayed in "Capitalist Poem #5" is familiar, and likeable as mock dramatization of the everyday routine of the poet to the presumed audience of American college writing program students. The banality of the subject, the speaker buying a pre-fabricated meal at an iconic American convenience store after a late evening shift doing monotonous work that is situated at the very bottom of the social ladder, is presented as inherently interesting, the lack of thematic freshness is sold as a virtue. In a culture where burritos and 7–11s have come to dominate the consciousness of the poets who prefer this experience to traveling the great monuments of Europe, "Capitalist Poem #5" stands as a representative late 1980s poem whose subject is as forgettable and interchangeable as the mass-produced, pre-cooked meal that the speaker buys. The last two lines of the poem mark a tonal departure from the laconic description of the poet's routine as McGrath tries to localize his "culinary" experience as symptomatic of the more general social problems in American society. The ironic connection of the poet's routine to the larger concept of social injustice, however, fails to achieve any effect because the poem, rather than dealing with a social problem, seems an egocentric exploration of the adolescent self. The numbered title of the poem implies the existence of a whole sequence of poems devoted to life under the framework of social criticism, or, at least, of the poet's attribution of such terminology to his poems.[10] But there is no clear sense of where the poet stands on social injustice on the basis of looking at "Capitalist Poem #5," which makes it a failed piece of rhetoric. Drawing on the pronouncements on the relationship of rhetoric and poetry that go back to Book X of Plato's *Republic*, Jonathan Holden simplifies the basic questions of rhetorical criticism of poetry as attempts to answer the question of "*who is speaking*

[10] Indeed, *Capitalism* contains several numbered "Capitalist" poems, all of which seem to suffer from the pretentious title which does not really relate their personal theme to the philosophy of Karl Marx and critics of capitalist society.

to whom, through what mask, and for what ostensible purpose."[11] Stanley Plumly further explains the success of a lyric poem as being dependent upon the poet's successful communication of tone and manifestation of voice. Rhetoric in a poem, then, "is the way tone of voice is achieved."[12] In the case of "Capitalist Poem #5," the first consideration by Holden is clearly specified as the poet is speaking to his peers and young, sympathetic readers and students of American popular culture. The mask of the poet is that of autobiographical confession, a post-1960s mainstay of much American poetry. The purpose of the poem, however, does not seem very clear as it may be anything from a satire on American consumerism to criticism of the workplace routine of part-time workers at American fast food restaurants. Moreover, one is left wondering whether McGrath's political affinity is with revolutionary change or with upholding the achievement of the capitalist society in America. As Joe Moffett explains, "McGrath's ambivalence toward both Capitalism and Marxism illustrates the position of the current subject, one who is able to identify the problem of ideology, but who is also caught within it and unable to escape."[13] In "Capitalist Poem #5," the poem's closure is perhaps its worst part for its vague noncommitance, yet there is a redeeming element of humor in the poem's laconicity and drabness, a sense of the poet's attempt to wax funny about his debilitating experience and to relate it, however ineptly, to larger issues of social inequality in America. Another poem in this mode, "Capitalist Poem #7," is a similar play on a childhood memory gone wrong in the poetic retelling: "I stole the UNICEF box. / I didn't mean to. / It was an accident. / I didn't turn it in at school. / I wanted it. / I kept it. / I

11 Jonathan Holden, *The Rhetoric of the Contemporary Lyric* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), xiii.

12 Stanley Plumly, *Argument & Song: Sources & Silences in Poetry* (New York: Handsel, 2003), 165.

13 Joe Moffett, "Beyond the Postmodern Long Poem: Campbell McGrath's 'The Bob Hope Poem.'" *EAPSU Online* 3 (2006): 55.

hid it in my closet."[14] The banality of the language and phrasing is, again, the most prominent element of the poem. Having built a sense of doing the wrong thing as a child by stealing the charity collection box, the poet then goes on to catalog a list of items that might be purchased using the money from the collection box, only to puncture the confession with a sly admission of not remembering the event correctly as "I might have gotten that money one year at Christmas" and the UNICEF box might really have just been lost and not stolen.[15] In "Capitalist Poem #19," McGrath explores the omnipresent American obsession with TV competitions—"it seems that by this time everyone in L.A. must be a lucky winner"[16] who is able to turn "the basement into an entertainment center with a large-screen TV and a fruit-juice bar for the kids. America, America."[17] The false promise of the American Dream, devalued through the cult of gambling and TV competitions, is ironized in a mock-serious denial of the materialist fantasy. But even McGrath, for all his attempt to wax ironic about the shallowness of contest participants, remains awed by the concept of American success that such winning entails:

> But who's to say that hand won't someday reach down gently to tap them all with its Midas touch, money from the sky, a chance to climb the pyramid of commodities, turning their whole life golden, magical, an almost sexual gratitude at the wonder of it. A touch soft as a kiss, but so much more! Everything's different now. Things are going to be fine from here on in.[18]

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14 Campbell McGrath, "Capitalist Poem #7," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 18.

15 McGrath, "Capitalist Poem #7," 18.

16 Campbell McGrath, "Capitalist Poem #19," in *Capitalism* (Hanover,: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 22.

17 McGrath, "Capitalist Poem #19," 22.

18 McGrath, "Capitalist Poem #19," 23.

The irony of this claim that instant cash prizes may provide the key to American happiness is not ultimately disputed. The poem ends on a moving description of McGrath's childhood friend, whose clothes "were from K-Mart and were always too old and too small and smelled bad."[19] When the friend's family won the lottery, there was no upward social mobility, yet their materialist needs were satisfied to a degree as they at least "bought two snowmobiles and a camper."[20] McGrath implies that even instant money does not make those Americans who acquire it happy, only able to buy more products to keep the economy going.

Perhaps the funniest poem by McGrath is "Capitalist Poem #22." It focuses on the construction of a heavy metal monster who rises from the sea as "a symbolic representation of American popular culture."[21] "So the party goes on, and it doesn't really matter what we watch, because all we're interested in is more punishment, and more, and faster—and could you turn the volume up please!"[22] This is a wise claim which nicely sums up McGrath's travel poems, which will be discussed next—with the volume of cross-country travel at its highest, quantity is supposed to create a sense of quality and emotion in those who try to interpret them.

The perennial travel poem, ranging from several lines to several pages, in which the author celebrates the young American rebel's iconoclastic road trip experience, seems the most noticeable poem in McGrath's oeuvre. "Sunrise and Moonfall, Rosarito Beach" is a typical piece in this vein. It narrates the story of the poet and a few of his friends who drive down to one of the popular Mexican seaside resorts that regularly welcome numerous young adults from the United States, especially college students taking a short break from their studies during the fall and spring

19 McGrath, "Capitalist Poem #19," 23.
20 McGrath, "Capitalist Poem #19," 23.
21 Campbell McGrath, "Capitalist Poem #22," in *Capitalism* (Hanover,: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 24.
22 McGrath, "Capitalist Poem #22," 25.

national holidays.[23] The early focus in the poem is on the alcoholic intoxication of the participants, implied by the image of the glowing "glass apple of mescal" which is seen as "half-full, hand-blown, imperfect / as our planet."[24] The description of the troupe's derangement of their senses is followed by McGrath's typical vagueness of language that seems a transgression rather than a case of being cool about the experience: "Sure, everything is blowing open / now, all the freeways and skinheads, the music / invisibly blasting, radio waves invading the spines and craniums / of all this."[25] The poet gets drunk and expects his consciousness to expand to Whitmanian proportions of cosmic embrace and originality, but his vague language fails to do justice to the description. The rebellious nature of the trip climaxes with the mention of Ed, a buddy of the poet, who gets up early one day and starts "driving golf balls out into the restlessly pounding surf."[26] Ed's gesture prompts the poet towards the one truly honest and credible phrase in the poem as he realizes the futility of their attempts to break free, if only for the few days of the road trip, from the social rules of their family and community: "Jesus, we're always hitting golf balls. It seems to be / some irreducible trait."[27] The poem is an ironic re-enactment of young Americans' traditional impulse to resist parental authority, to set out on the road, to have unlimited fun, and to make sense of their lives along the way, yet all that McGrath and his buddies come up with during their trip is a disappointing experience of "smashing the plaster icons" with spoiled golf shots in a doomed effort to escape their middle-class lives, trying to assert they are more alive than their conformist contemporaries, portrayed as "that other white world of men /

23 These include Memorial Day and Labor Day.

24 Campbell McGrath, "Sunrise and Moonfall, Rosarito Beach," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 5.

25 McGrath, "Sunrise and Moonfall, Rosarito Beach," 5.

26 McGrath, "Sunrise and Moonfall, Rosarito Beach," 5.

27 McGrath, "Sunrise and Moonfall, Rosarito Beach," 5.

driving golf balls to seas of dust and oblivion— / chrome-headed, flag-waving, violent, American."[28] Strangely, the rhetoric of this poem is effective, for, by the end, McGrath realizes that the radicalism of himself and his buddies who crave enlightenment on a road trip is salvaged by the poet's realization of the futility of their escape from the conformist structure of their lives. As George Orwell earlier claimed, "it *is* possible to be a normal decent person and yet to be fully alive."[29] While the Orwell comment targeted the nonconformist tendencies among the British intellectuals of the 1930s, D.H. Lawrence, even earlier, described the futility of the American national impulse to leave one's family and hometown behind, setting out on a transcontinental journey, seeking a better opportunity beyond the horizon: "Men are free when they are living in a homeland, not when they are straying and breaking away."[30] Lawrence sees Americans as taking the freedom to leave their present situation as a sign of immaturity: "Men are free when they belong to a living, organic, believing community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealized purpose. Not when they are escaping to some wild west. The most unfree souls go west, and shout of freedom. Men are freest when they are most unconscious of freedom. The shout is a rattling of chains, always was."[31] Joel Brouwer explains that the instant popularity of McGrath's early poems may turn sour with the recurrence of the Beat-like rebellion against social norms by seeking out "epiphanies by the dozen on moonlit gravel roads, mountaintops, bar stools, and deserted beaches," a Jack Kerouac-like use of travel across the continent that is presented as significant "simply because it is

28 McGrath, "Sunrise and Moonfall, Rosarito Beach," 5.

29 Quoted in Norman Podhoretz, "My War with Allen Ginsberg," *Commentary* 104, no. 2 (1997): 40.

30 D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1951), 16–17.

31 Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 17.

happening."[32] In "Silt, Colorado," one of the several short prose poems in *Capitalism*, McGrath presents a typical glimpse of the continuous road trip across America undertaken with his buddies. Although the landscape of "empty ski towns, mining towns, full moon on the light snow and Mike asleep since Denver" would suggest possibilities of drawing on the legacy of earlier twentieth-century Pacific Northwestern poets of lonely landscapes such as Richard Hugo, William Stafford, and David Wagoner, McGrath decides to avoid any appropriation of the confessional lyric mode of the self as projected on the outer, lonely landscape, which was the forte of these older authors. Instead, he presents the Colorado town as if by way of refusal to describe it: "To / describe Silt would require a tactile vocabulary to match the roiling high country, purple and dusk fading / down from the peaks: long grazing plateaus above the river, savage dun-pale pastels, the cliffs, gulch and / guyot, each shade, each stone itself."[33] The potential of a landscape poem is wasted as the poet focuses his poem not on the dynamism between the self and the landscape but on the nonexistent drama of his refusal to give a realistic portrait of the landscape. Strangely, his poetics of descriptive denial becomes undermined toward realism when he does exactly what he has refused to do, that is, to give a lucid portrait of the scene in simple language: "Five horses walked through tall grass down to the young Colorado / River to drink—the ice was breaking up, mist was rising from the water."[34] McGrath does his best writing precisely when he discards his obsession with being artistic and deep. In the second half of the poem, McGrath again gives in to his restless imagination as the potential of the rugged, lonely beauty of Silt, Colorado, is abandoned in order to whizz the travelling

32 Joel Brouwer, "Accordion Music and Raw Profusion," *Parnassus* 26, no. 2 (2002): 170.

33 Campbell McGrath, "Silt, Colorado," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 6.

34 McGrath, "Silt, Colorado," 6.

group of himself and his friends back to the Pacific Coast: "Then the long pull—Martian Utah, sad Las Vegas, the ponderous, mesquite-crazed Mojave, Baker, / Barstow, Los Angeles."[35] On the return journey, McGrath zooms in on a micro-drama at a cafe: "In Barstow I stopped for a cup of coffee. After ten minutes at the red counter the / waitress asked us all to leave. The kitchen was on fire and our coffee was free. Looking back through the / plate-glass window I saw pies in the rack: apple, cherry, coconut cream, lemon meringue. Mike sat up and / his hair was splayed with sleep as the fire engines raced past us into the parking lot. That was Barstow. / Silt is beyond me."[36] The portrait of the fire is downplayed by the cynicism of the speaker, who prefers to expound on his feelings about himself and on the monotony of nocturnal driving across the States, as if no drama was being witnessed at the café. The refusal of the poet to give an involved portrait of the café fire in "Silt, Colorado" makes the poem despicable on moral grounds, while the narcissistic extreme to which McGrath goes in such a case is hardly interesting in itself. The poet claims that the little town is "beyond" his ability to identify with the trauma of the locals even when chance puts him in such a responsible position to identify with the landscape being portrayed. Brouwer argues that McGrath should not be likened to Whitman and Ginsberg, two great earlier poets who explored the American myth of the open road, as McGrath "is too aware of the Whitmanic and Beat myths to participate in them as a true believer."[37] This refusal to commit to the tradition of the road trip poem as a personal experience that includes visionary enlightenment and the capacity for sympathy with strangers met on the road is a strange element of McGrath's sensibility, since this approach prevents his poems from being effective rhetorical statements about the situation of American culture. On the level of personal epiphany,

35 McGrath, "Silt, Colorado," 6.

36 McGrath, "Silt, Colorado," 6.

37 Brouwer, "Accordion Music and Raw Profusion," 172.

success is likewise denied on account of McGrath's tone of distancing himself from the potentially painful, or personal, subject matter in his poems.

The disengagement of the poet from the places he goes to and the people he meets affects his road trip poems in general. In "Rifle, Colorado," McGrath sketches a brief portrait of a stop at a country diner in the mountains. His snotty refusal to give details about the other customers in the Rifle Cafe, however, is falsely presented as a poetic virtue in itself: "I don't know what their names were, where they lived, whether their families raised cattle or horses or stayed in bed in the morning."[38] The second section of this prose piece tries to redeem the earlier refusal to describe what the poet sees: "I do know that there were cowboy hats and dirty orange workmen's gloves, the coffee was strong, the / pancakes were good, Main Street was gravel, the river ran by, the sun rose just as we got there, night left / the Rockies reluctantly, snow and timber diminished in daylight, the mountains emerged slowly with dawn— / —high country in winter is beautiful and lonely."[39] What the "I don't know" attitude of the poet toward the small-town cafe being portrayed ultimately leads to is a despicable tone of one-upmanship that renders the poem, again, a rhetorical failure, as the poet's refusal to identify with the people and places he portrays becomes despicable, immoral, and boring.[40]

Overall, the road trip poems in *Capitalism* are monotonous as regards their tone and theme, for whatever exotic place or out-of-the-way town the poet appropriates, from Mexico to Colorado to Jamaica, his experience while traveling is uniformly the same, noncommittal, futile, presenting himself as always obsessed with

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38 Campbell McGrath, "Rifle, Colorado," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 7.

39 McGrath, "Rifle, Colorado," 7.

40 McGrath is not alone in practicing what Allan Williamson calls "the poetry of cynicism." For another occurence of a cynical attitude towards the subject of the poem, see the previous chapter on Mark Halliday.

being on the move, never willing to commit to any single place, feeling, or idea. There is never a sense of purpose to the constant traveling of the poet and his buddies; by inference, the only motivation for the trip seems to be an escape from oneself. This is not to say, however, that American literature is short on good car driving and traveling poems. From William Carlos Williams to Robert Bly and beyond, American poets have portrayed car driving as an activity that gives one the privacy to do some serious thinking about oneself and American culture. In "I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror," Agha Shadid Ali becomes emotionally involved in the history and coloring of the whole of the American continent as he is "driving toward Utah, / keeping the entire hemisphere in view— / Colombia vermilion, Brazil blue tar, / some countries wiped clean of color: Peru // is titanium white."[41] The involvement of Ali with the countries of the continent is imagined, abstract, yet moving as the poet uses the symbolism of colors to internalize the different landscapes and regions. Perhaps the best example of persuasive road trip rhetoric in American poetry is "Travels in North America" by Weldon Kees (1914–55). In this poem, Kees portrays a mid-twentieth-century apocalyptic vision of a conformist America that is negotiated by the rollercoaster ride of the poet in his car that sweeps across the country in a series of forgettable and uniform places. Jeff Sychterz explains that the poem moves beyond being a mere catalog of road trip stops as it "develops the American landscape as an extended metaphor for the American Dream, and the journey as the search for that dream."[42] For Kees, the journey strengthens his interpretation of the dream as a failed concept that does not bring happiness and prosperity to its adherents, but, rather, fosters conformity, consumerism, madness, and despair in those who believe in it:

41 Agha Shahid Ali, "I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror," in *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems* (New York: Norton, 2009), 161.

42 Jeff Sychterz, "On 'Travels In North America,'" *Modern American Poetry*, accessed January 25, 2013, http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/kees/ontravels.htm.

> And sometimes, shivering in St. Paul or baking in Atlanta,
> The sudden sense that you have seen it all before:
> The man who took your ticket at the Gem in Council Bluffs
> Performed a similar function for you at the Shreveport Tivoli.
> Joe's Lunch appears again, town after town, next door
> To Larry's Shoe Repair, adjoining, inescapably, the Acme
> Doughnut Shop.
> Main, First, and Market fuse together.[43]

There is precision of language in these lines by Kees, coupled with a bleak vision of American culture that makes the author's attitude to his country memorable, although painful and disturbing. McGrath, on the other hand, lacks an interesting voice to share his vision of America as his road trip poems are all too often drowned by pretentious or sloppy language. Still, for Kees as well as for McGrath, the road trip as an exercise in self-discovery becomes a meditation on the role of the individual within society. Sychterz explains why the activity becomes so traumatic for Kees as the diversity of the American regions, landscapes, towns, and streets begins to blur in a uniformity of similar "motels, indistinguishable landmarks, unattainable wealth, and bad food."[44] Kees desperately wants to love and enjoy America, yet cannot do so as the American Dream of success and social recognition, which is the central myth that has sustained American culture ever since the Puritans, has been eroded by its materialist development by the mid-twentieth century:

> Glenrock, Wyoming; and Chehalis, Washington
> Are momentarily the shifting centers of a dream,
> Swept bare of formica and television aerials
> And rows of cars that look a little more like fish each year.[45]

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43 Weldon Kees, "Travels in North America," in *The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees*, ed. Donald Justice (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 116.

44 Sychterz, "On 'Travels In North America.'"

45 Kees, "Travels in North America," 116.

Kees becomes disgusted with the loss of his dream, which has disappeared somewhere in the deadening sameness of America that he encounters everywhere he drives. This negative impression is, however, predictable as advice against travel was already given by Ralph Waldo Emerson. In "Self-Reliance," he claims that "the soul is no traveler; the wise man stays at home" in order to achieve a more comprehensive vision of the self in the world that physical travel might hinder.[46] Still, Kees wants to prove that there is a sense to traveling as an act of private exploration of one's position within American society:

> Journeys are ways of marking out a distance,
> Or dealing with the past, however ineffectually,
> Or ways of searching for some new enclosure in this space
> Between the oceans.[47]

In an apocalyptic voice that allows for no optimism as regards the future, Kees paints a comprehensive portrait of American civilization anyway, only to lament the uniformity of its urban and suburban landscape that breeds uniformity of thought. Ultimately, he sees the American civilization as corrupt, fit to be punished by flooding from the oceans that wash its eastern and western shores:

> And here, now textured like a blotter, like the going years
> And difficult to see, is where you are, and where I am,
> And where the oceans cover us.[48]

The negative interpretation of American culture as a hotbed of conformist drabness that deserves destruction seems extreme,

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46 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, ed. Joel Porte and Saundra Morris (New York: Norton, 2001), 133.

47 Kees, "Travels in North America," 117.

48 Kees, "Travels in North America," 118.

yet it is a product of the same culture that has offered spiritual and economic fulfillment, a dream whose failed pursuit really brings social disconnection and insanity for many participants. As Philip Slater explains, the more Americans have maintained their individualist position within society, the more they have felt "disconnected, bored, lonely, unprotected, unnecessary, and unsafe."[49] It is the tragedy of Kees that he fails to find a positive interpretation to his obsession with long-distance car travel, proving Emerson's dictum against travel to be an ominous truth. Dana Gioia explains that life, for Kees, "was a meaningless exile from a country he could not recall, a punishment for a crime he did not understand."[50] "Travels in North America" presents the poet as a spokesman for "a noisy world we are trapped in," whose landscape and mythology are destroyed by the modern loss of faith, rendering America "a spiritually bankrupt society" that one may understand only through observation of popular culture, represented by the various "ephemera of slang, popular songs, brand names, advertising, fashion, journalism, movies" that serve as a stark backdrop for the culture poet in America who wishes to "dramatize the human situation."[51]

In "Memphis," McGrath portrays a Kees-like transcontinental journey from Los Angeles to Washington, with a significant stop in Memphis, Tennessee, to visit Graceland, the local mansion of Elvis Presley turned into a museum dedicated to the King. The iconic Memphis home of the King is deconstructed by the skeptical poet:

> … All I remember is how small-time the place seemed, just a country house, really, the almost pathetic homeliness about

49 Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 30.

50 Dana Gioia, "The Loneliness of Weldon Kees," in *Can Poetry Matter?: Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2002), 69.

51 Gioia, "The Loneliness of Weldon Kees," 81.

> it. No guitar-shaped pool, no solid-gold Cadillac. Just the TV he always watched while he ate. A statue he gave to his mama. Racks of spangled, American eagle jumpsuits. We left town right afterwards.[52]

Unlike the waitress in the local diner who sincerely thinks "Graceland is about the most moving place she ever was,"[53] the poet tries to present himself as a highbrow whose dignity shall not be soiled by the admission of any love for the King of 1950s popular music. The poem closes with a short, noncommittal enumeration of the stops along the way from Memphis to Washington, DC, in which the hazy description of two sites of Civil War battles stands out as the poet and his friends drive "past the terrible battlefield at Shiloh, and later Bull Run, places where Americans died in a roar of musket fire".[54] The tone of the poem is descriptive, the language precise (which is not very typical of McGrath), and yet there is a sense of McGrath's habitual resistance to commitment to any place, story, or emotion. Beneath his cloak of snobbish smirking, the real tone of the poet in "Memphis" remains a mystery. This is the major failure of McGrath in the road trip poems—his attitude makes identification with any place or landscape impossible. The traveling across the continent is presented as an essential fact of life, mysteriously prompted by an invisible force, as a constant, inexplicable urge of the poet and his buddies which, however, ultimately means nothing and leads nowhere.

"Los Angeles" is a reprise of the intoxicated trip theme that includes hitting golf balls into the ocean and driving back home, still high, to watch an endless series of movies.[55] The final moment of

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52 Campbell McGrath, "Memphis," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 12.

53 McGrath, "Memphis," 12.

54 McGrath, "Memphis," 12–13.

55 See Campbell McGrath, "Los Angeles," in *Capitalism* (Hanover,: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 14–15.

dawn comes with yet another realization of how the experience degrades into a sense of futility:

> Dawn finally came, and thick dew on the grass and the fallen fruit of the lemon tree in the wet green grass. The cats appeared from somewhere, warm and hungry. Nobody fed them yesterday, I was alone in the backyard with the cats. Everyone was asleep inside. The TV was still on, rerunning movies, and I could hear the Ramones banging out "Rockaway Beach." I was alone in the backyard. I was alone with the cats, and the wet grass, and the deflated basketball, and the fallen oranges and lemons, and the eucalyptus tree, and the birds, and the rising sun.[56]

What seems to be the problem with this poem is, surprisingly, not the banality of McGrath's language (although his way with words is as careless as ever) but the credibility of the poet's voice. "Los Angeles" is a tribute to the young American rebels without a cause, yet the poet does not portray their experience with sufficient involvement for the reader to be able to empathize with what Brouwer calls "a bunch of rich white kids getting high in the suburbs and cracking themselves up, sincerely believing that their every non sequitur is sheer genius."[57] Indeed, McGrath seems to have always believed in his uncanny ability to convey his experience and interpretation of America in fresh, original, memorable language. In an interview with Sara Kaplan, he advises young poets to "never throw away a draft, a stanza, a line—someday you may wake up realizing the rest of the poem it belongs to, or how to fix it, or what transformation it might be subject to. That is, poems that appear to be tomato plants sometimes grow into oak trees. And even weeds may turn out to be dandelions—which are

56 McGrath, "Los Angeles," 15. Linebreaks are ignored in this prose paragraph.
57 Brouwer, "Accordion Music and Raw Profusion," 169.

beautiful things in summer."[58] Among the many road trip poems in *Capitalism* whose rhetoric fails, attention should be paid to "Langdon, North Dakota." While its strategy is the typical road trip with the poet's buddies, restless in the attempt to log as many miles as possible on any given day, unlike the disengagement of the poet from his subject matter problem in "Silt, Colorado" and "Rifle, Colorado," the Langdon poem manages to communicate the poet's involvement with a tragic local story of a farm being auctioned in a surprisingly powerful gesture of empathy, in a voice that is credible. A dominant phenomenon in the poem is the presence of a prairie wind which "shook the waist-high / grass and weeds, lifting conic sections of dust swirling into the white, slanting, late-summer sunlight."[59] The wind becomes more than a symbol of the Great Plains existence, though. It functions as a link between the empathy sought by the passer-by poet and his buddies, the auctioneer who is sympathetic to the plight of the bankrupt family, and an imagined history of the Scandinavian colonization of the area which constitutes the middle section of the poem. The wind becomes the agent of action as it "pulled the auctioneer's words from his mouth and left him working his jaws broadly and soundlessly, a grey-haired man in a cowboy hat waving his arms while the buzz of grasshoppers from the endless fields and the noise of thrashing leaves roared and roared."[60] The wind then metamorphoses into "the sound of / the citizens of Langdon singing hymns in the one-story Lutheran church at the edge of town, as their / forebears had offered up prayers of thanks a hundred years earlier at the first sight of the borderless / grasslands, moving west in the curl of the great human wave of

58 Sara Kaplan, "Interview: Campbell McGrath on Place, the Prose Poem, and the State of Poetry in America," *Poetry Daily*, accessed January 14, 2014, www.poems.com/special_features/prose/essay_mcgrath.php.

59 Campbell McGrath, "Langdon, North Dakota," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 16.

60 McGrath, "Langdon, North Dakota," 16.

migration."[61] A monumental passage of mythologizing ambition is, unfortunately, mired with McGrath's typical penchant for overwriting: "It was the sweet wind of Capitalism in the inland of Sargasso."[62] The Langdon poem closes with a display of forced sympathy as McGrath imagines the purchase of a plastic Christmas tree at the farm auction so that he may carry "the draggled plastic tree across the continent and back in my heart."[63] Although McGrath feels sympathy for the locals, a feeling whose deployment is unique within the whole of the book, its potential for kitsch lurks nearby: "I have felt the silvered needles sting, heard them rustle in the glow of blinking Christmas lights like wheatfields in the first wind of autumn."[64] The poem ends on more poeticizing on the meanings of the wind which "carries the seeds of life and the dust of extinction. It is a winnowing wind. It is a bitter wind."[65] While the potential of the wind as a governing symbol of prairie life and a dominant presence in the region cannot be emphasized enough, its use as a ploy to get closer to the consciousness of the farmers being portrayed in the poem fails as McGrath's attempt at empathy rings false as the "draggled plastic tree" item in the auction is kitschy debasement of the spiritual dimension of Christmas.

In "Berlin," a skirmish with other eaters at a Burger King results in a moment of epiphanic transcendence when the poet leaves the fast food joint: "Out into the night of stars. Comets rising like angelfish, moving in luminous schools to the horizon, a taste / like cinnamon or rivers of dust where the faint metal clang of the moon on your tongue is a memory of the / black desert and Las Vegas shimmering in the center, neon pearl in the oyster of

61 McGrath, "Langdon, North Dakota," 16–17.
62 McGrath, "Langdon, North Dakota," 17.
63 McGrath, "Langdon, North Dakota," 17.
64 McGrath, "Langdon, North Dakota," 17.
65 McGrath, "Langdon, North Dakota," 17.

human misery."[66] This tirade is aptly punctured by the poet's deprecatory realization that his propensity to be struck by an urban epiphanic moment is fake, contrived, and ultimately ridiculous: "After a minute you realize you have your sunglasses on. You can't even see the stars. It's the million lights of the Kurfürstendamm, white and yellow like poppies."[67] The sobering effect of walking down Berlin's famous boulevard at night blinded by having sunglasses on thus makes the poem a rare achievement in the book—McGrath constructs a pop culture encounter worthy of literary representation, only to realize that striving for epiphany in the streets of Berlin is impossible, and, ultimately ridiculous, fit to be deconstructed by the postmodernism-conscious poet.

If McGrath's ambition in the short lyrics and road trip poems in *Capitalism* is often not matched by the fresh language and voice of an author who is emotionally involved with what he portrays, there are several longer poems in the book in which the faults of the short pieces are not so prominent. In "Where the Water Runs Down," the first section of the poem is devoted to portraying in language two iconic landscape photographs by Anselm Adams.[68] "The inverted V of cliff in shadow / and the chevron of dark sky nearly meet / to consume the crest / of carefully delineated sunlight along the ridge."[69] The introductory description of a well-known photographed landscape is destroyed with the jarring sound of "carefully delineated sunlight" that betrays the poet's total disregard for the auditory effect of words. The description of the isolated landscape goes on: "It is a pure, chromatic world, / a landscape where ideas dominate facts / as light determines exposure."[70] The link of the

66 Campbell McGrath, "Berlin," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 21.

67 McGrath, "Berlin," 21.

68 The Adams photographs which McGrath describes are "High Country Crags and Moon, Sunrise" and "Aspens, Dawn, Dolores River Canyon."

69 Campbell McGrath, "Where the Water Runs Down," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 9.

70 McGrath, "Where the Water Runs Down," 9.

barren mountain landscape image to the poet's abstract thoughts of unclear logic just does not come across as "ideas dominate facts" sounds interesting but when compared to light, which "determines exposure," the whole phrase makes any attempt at interpretation futile. What is problematic about the poem is, again, the use of obscure and pretentious language. McGrath seems an unacknowledged L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet, but in a way not to be proud of. His words and their logic tend to be careless and impenetrable when they should be referential and specific. The poem next portrays McGrath's response to another Adams photograph, where trees "become wardens of an Emersonian ideal, / light thrown scintillant off edges and spires like needles / on a wave towing zones of sure and distinct tonality."[71] McGrath does not let the image of the Adams original stand on its own; he feels it is his mission to explicate, in heavy-handed language, what the image conveys. McGrath is clearly in love with his use of language, yet the passage rings phony and opaque since the connection between the "Emersonian ideal" and the light on the trees is not sufficiently grounded and the last two lines in the quotation present a worst-case scenario of pretentious, vague, leaden diction that does not match the beauty and mystery of the grove of trees in the Adams photograph. Neither is the possible meditation of the poet on the image developed presented in interesting language. McGrath just seems to think that any word and phrase he puts down belongs, and the more elevated diction the better, yet this impulse goes against the anti-intellectual mode in contemporary American culture poetry. The second section of "Where the Water Runs Down" is a meditation triggered by the "Grand Coulee Dam" song by Woody Guthrie, who is hailed as one who tries to sing of a "vast, explicit history, east and west, / growth and opportunity and inequality, crystalline in the moment—".[72] Yet the logic of this section is McGrath "correcting" Guthrie for leaving out

71 McGrath, "Where the Water Runs Down," 9.
72 McGrath, "Where the Water Runs Down," 10.

an important dimension of the structure, "the nature of that time / when a dam was something to sing about— / an attitude of profound wonder, honed by despair, / humming through high-tension wires / all across the country"[73] The third section of "Where the Water Runs Down" again uses the conceit of the poet correcting the Adams photographs: "What Ansel Adams leaves out / is neither song, stone, nor innuendo / of light cascading through rain-laced aspens."[74] McGrath introduces a personalized story of two hikers through which the two landscapes of the Adams photographs merge. Again, the linguistic opacity and heavyhandedness bog the poem down: "they beat a riven, smoldering log with pine boughs, / sending sparks like clouds and flocks of birds / and winter storm in the valley / rising up to the stars, splinters of light or stone, / innumerable and inseparable."[75] The last line but one is obscure in the 1970s deep image way of obscurity—there is little rational connection between light and stone, and the last line is jarring, unpronounceable, and heavy in terms of rhythm.

There are two more modes of poetry in *Capitalism*. First, there is the rhymed, regular poem. An example of this mode is "Dialectical Poem #1." The poem delivers very little by way of logical treatment of the class or social problems of the forest industry workers. The one notable fact about it is the author's lack of linguistic and metrical discrimination:

> The good wood died: hacked, chopped, rent, burnt black,
> Fried up like bacon. What a forest of symbols that was!
> In those days they skied cross-country to school and back,
> Uphill both ways. Now ashes linger, whitened, fire-black,
> koans gilding the upsurge, hang-gliding above what was.[76]

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73 McGrath, "Where the Water Runs Down," 10.

74 McGrath, "Where the Water Runs Down," 10.

75 McGrath, "Where the Water Runs Down," 11.

76 Campbell McGrath, "Dialectical Poem #1," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 1.

The rhyming is banal to the uttermost (black-back, was-was), the rhythm of these lines so plodding and unmusical one wonders where the rock music influence upon McGrath's work that the poet is so proud to claim went.[77] The awkward use of short words and the dissonant sounds present throughout the poem further intensify the lack of movement. The poem does not progress; its static language weighs it down like lead. The poet is in love with using words to excess. As Stephen Burt would later claim, McGrath would never "use one word where three will do,"[78] and yet the love does not come across as viable in "Dialectical Poem #1." The philosophical pretension of the title (and, indeed, of many other poem titles in *Capitalism*) is nowhere developed or clarified by the poem itself. There is a repeated motif of a forest fire in the poem, interspersed with an implied parallel story of a workers' strike, yet the drama is never shown, only hinted at, with inadequate information given, as the poet chooses to end his poem with a catalog which does not reveal enough of the drama associated with the burnt forest location:

> But the wood was hewn to make a ship: ghost-white ashes
> serve the mariner as stars. Scabs and strikers collide/merge:
> just as historical opposites form a new whole, a clash
> without residue of death. There's no such thing as ashes
> stars, timber, ships, men: all manner of destinies converge.[79]

It seems easy to agree with Brad Leithauser, one of the poets and critics associated with the rise of New Formalism in the 1980s and 1990s, who claims that the post-1960s proliferation of free verse confessionalism in American poetry brought a widespread poetics of "metrical illiteracy" as even "well-known poets simply

77 On the influence of rock music upon McGrath's poetry see, for example, Campbell McGrath, interview by Dallas Crow, *Bomb* 46 (1994), 57.

78 Stephen Burt, "Song of the Sunshine State," *Nation*, April 15, 2002.

79 McGrath, "Dialectical Poem #1," 1.

have not worked in form and could not successfully if they tried."[80] McGrath mostly avoids formal poems, probably for the very reason given by Leithauser. To write a simple rhymed poem that meets the requirements of the genre is "a surprisingly difficult undertaking" that no longer seems to be part of the younger American poet's bag of tricks and techniques.[81] There is one more example in *Capitalism* of a failed poem in tight stanzaic structure, "What They Ate," of which the first stanza is quoted:

> All manner of fowl and wild game: venison, raccoon, opossum, turkey.
> Abundant fishes, excepting salmon, which ws. found distasteful.
> Meat of all sorts, especially pig, which roamed free and was fatty.
> Also shellfish: quahogs and foot-long oysters; lobster; though
> considered wasteful.[82]

The catalog of the heavenly feast menu enjoyed by the early settlers in New England goes on for two more stanzas, and yet the poem fails to suggest the reason for piling up such a list of foods. As with the previous rhymed poem, "What They Ate" uses easy, formulaic rhyming (distasteful-wasteful, berries-cherries, parsley-sparsely) and suffers from a similar heaviness of sound and rhythm.

One of the highlights of *Capitalism* is "Miami," a little imagistic poem in the Williams-Creeley mode of a short-lined free verse imagistic poem in simple language. The poem is short, clear, specific, and governed by the visual perception of a single moment in time (i.e., approaching landing in an aircraft). Its language is ordinary, yet it is the William Carlos Williams kind of ordinariness, evocative, suggesting a definite range of emotion to be felt by the reader:

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80 See Brad Leithauser, "Metrical Illiteracy," in *New Expansive Poetry*, ed. R.S. Gwynn (Ashland: Story Line Press, 1999), 151.

81 See Leithauser, "Metrical Illiteracy," 156.

82 Campbell McGrath, "What They Ate," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 19.

Banking in to the Miami airport
I saw traffic like a river of light
2000 matching houses, refineries,
Parking lots with new cars by the acre,
A grid, a city of streets,
The red signs of restaurants.[83]

The second stanza of the poem shares a sense of wonder at the visual perception being portrayed: "The runway lights / are blue and green. / O! the runway lights / are blue, green."[84] This poem is a solid rhetorical achievement, giving a moving, playful, effective sense of the moment of an aircraft landing and the sensory perceptions involved in the experience. Most of the good things in McGrath's poetry seem to happen outside the realm of the author's conscious intelligence, when he does not try to write like himself but adopts the style of another.

The second section of *Capitalism*, bearing the ironic headline "Two Dust," is introduced by a quote from "Talking Columbia," a song by Woody Guthrie. The section contains just three longer meditative poems of epic ambition which seem the best of the whole book. In "The Genius of Industry," McGrath sketches an admiring portrait of General Grant, who is hailed as a model American genius of warfare who "knew / that victory meant death, / a new, fully modern kind of death, / an industrialized democracy of killing,"[85] which drives the poet to juxtapose Grant with Henry Ford as "Ulysses Grant was to warfare / what Henry Ford was to the automobile."[86] McGrath sees in both Grant and Ford the quintessential American hardness, aggressive motivation to reach a

83 Campbell McGrath, "Miami," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 28.
84 McGrath, "Miami," 28.
85 Campbell McGrath, "The Genius of Industry," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 41.
86 McGrath, "The Genius of Industry,"41.

goal on the shoulders of countless subordinates. The achievement of the automobile industry thus becomes a model for America's impulse to change from microdiversity to macrouniformity, into "a product of the cultural assembly line"[87] and the culture, including poetry, becomes subservient to "a new idiom, a new pace to American life, an endless refinement / down to some replicable pattern, an industrialized essence."[88] The Whitmanian sound of heavy industrial tools is internalized by McGrath, who hails America as "an emerald / and turquoise lung, rising and falling, // the pulse of a primordial engine."[89]

In "The Cult of the Individual," the first section is a portrait of several frontier expansion figures whose stories are nowadays mediated to Americans by TV. These frontier figures "were magnificent in their isolation."[90] In the second section of the poem, McGrath focuses on the story of Meriwether Lewis, of the Lewis and Clark exploration expedition. McGrath compares the matter-of-fact style of Lewis's journals to the way *"we might tell of a drive to a friend's house in Connecticut—where the traffic was bad, stopping for coffee, meat loaf and gravy for dinner."*[91] The section climaxes in McGrath's dramatization of a day rich in epiphanic revelations that Lewis spends away from his party of explorers. The third section of the poem is an insertion of McGrath's commentary on American sensibility: "There is a terrible loneliness in America, in its vast empty spaces, its distances and recesses, its prairies / and deserts and its endlessly retreating mountain ranges."[92] This complaint, however, soon proves to be a rhetorical conceit used by McGrath to keep his creative juices flowing as he knowingly confesses that "there is always another town,

87 McGrath, "The Genius of Industry," 42.
88 McGrath, "The Genius of Industry," 42–43.
89 McGrath, "The Genius of Industry," 44.
90 Campbell McGrath, "The Cult of the Individual," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 46.
91 McGrath, "The Cult of the Individual," 47–48.
92 McGrath, "The Cult of the Individual," 51.

another grain elevator and empty siding, another day of driving."[93] The attempt of the poet to identify, merge, become one with the wild and civilized landscapes proves futile as, having set up camp by himself, he builds a fire like a would-be American pioneer, "when the moment of lonely panic gripped me so fiercely I threw everything back in the car, loose hot dogs, the jumbled tent and sleeping bag, and hit the road spraying gravel, desperate to get out of Enders, to get someplace else, someplace with people."[94] The poem ends, in the fourth and final section, with an account of Lewis's suicide, which is presented as a case of the vast American wilderness taking hold of the explorer's sanity.[95]

The last poem of *Capitalism*, "Dust," is an atheist late-1980s take on the biblical symbol of life's brevity and futility, related to the powers of the imagination to transform and validate human experience. The poem occupies a central position in the book, for it is a rare occurrence of the poet workshopping his poetics of youthful exuberance and restless road trip lifestyle that posits the middle-class American values, Beat-Generation-like, as anathema to the sensibility of the young intellectual. The first couple of lines are Proustian in their attempt to explore the memories, willed and involuntary, of the poet: "Days, hours, minutes, / a hunger for the fruit of some dimly remembered past. // *A man waiting for the bus with a vacuum cleaner*."[96] The last line, italicized, marks the first of several insertions in the main progression of the poem which aspire to giving an air of literariness, would-be allusions that allude to no works beyond the poem, italicized to give more weight to their meaning. In the next couple of lines, the American continent-wide driving sensibility of McGrath is nicely summarized in a miniature that evokes the multivocal narrative of the *U.S.A. Trilogy*

93 McGrath, "The Cult of the Individual," 52.
94 McGrath, "The Cult of the Individual," 52.
95 McGrath, "The Cult of the Individual," 53–4.
96 McGrath, Campbell McGrath, "Dust," in *Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 55.

by John Dos Passos: "Miles click by, trees, memories, / the reflective eyes of highway markers / in the darkness. The movie stops, / then starts again, / random images tumbling from the projector, / a newsreel out of control."[97] Then another memory is evoked: "While crossing the reservation in Arizona a song from your childhood comes on the radio in Navajo."[98] The next couple of lines include a sampling of McGrath's favorite sights visited in other poems in *Capitalism*, with a surprising commentary on the nature of such cataloging:

> Great Falls and Guthrie Center.
> Shiloh and Antietam.
> Plymouth Rock and the Grand Coulee Dam.
>
> Whatever list we choose will be inadequate:[99]

The admission of the poet's failure to communicate with words is a very rare phenomenon in McGrath's work. The poem also contains a summary of the other road trip poems in all their futility and restlessness: "We drank six kinds of malt liquor / We ate at McDonalds four times in one day. // You can drive from D.C. to L.A. in 48 hours / if you just average 60 mph, including stops."[100] Unlike Jack Kerouac, who made his "mad" characters and their constant traveling across America matter as a mission of personal interest to the writer and his audience, McGrath leaves the exercise in mobility unexplained. Beyond being a reflection of the traditional American restlessness, the road trip in his version feels morally vacuous and useless.

If "Dust" contains a rare admission by its author of his failure as a user of language, this is soon negated by another example of

97 McGrath, "Dust," 55.
98 McGrath, "Dust," 55.
99 McGrath, "Dust," 55.
100 McGrath, "Dust," 56.

obscure and imprecise diction, the "dim lands of peace" vagueness that Ezra Pound famously warned against: "apples, drops of water, sunlight's / shattered prismatic radiance."[101] A simple description of the effect of sunlight will not do; McGrath feels the urge to wax intelligent about the image. As soon as the poet tries to be deep about anything, his linguistic ineptitude renders such lines foregrounded, pretentious, and therefore, failed on the level of rhetoric: "*Language itself is just dust* [italics mine], crystalline particles, / a blue snow descending in silence."[102] Yet the poet keeps trying to find adequate expression for his vision of the national culture, as in the following interpretation of the world as defined by moments of epiphany: "We keep waiting for the moment when everything comes together, the revelation on the mountaintop."[103] As McGrath tries to sum up his revelatory vision in a coherent passage, "the great matrix of America revealed at last," a realization comes that this vision is unattainable: "But it doesn't happen that way."[104] McGrath is too much of a realist to allow for moments of transcendence that would not ring false: "The days retract like a telescope, images and words. The moment slips away. It never existed. The vision on the mountaintop never happened."[105] McGrath still subscribes to the idea of the road trip as an answer to all questions about America and oneself. At the same time, he is aware of the futility of the road trip poetics since its moral vacuum gives little answer to the deepest and most painful spiritual questions posed by any American. The poet's grappling with the failure of language to render moments of intense revelatory experience is among the poem's greatest charms: "I'm waiting for Elizabeth. / I'm standing beneath the true American

101 McGrath, "Dust," 55.
102 McGrath, "Dust," 56.
103 McGrath, "Dust," 55.
104 McGrath, "Dust," 56.
105 McGrath, "Dust," 56.

stars. / I'm looking up, in wonder."[106] By implication, although McGrath's America is doomed to become dust, its present state lends the sensitive beholder a sense of infinite possibilities to celebrate, explore, sing.

American Noise is the second book by McGrath. Published in 1993, it develops the themes of restless travel across the United States, searching for a blueprint to American culture. Gone is the pretentious titling of numbered Capitalist poems. While *American Noise* is still dominated by road trip poems, there are important poetic homages to McGrath's literary models and there is, in the final poem, a trace of the poet's wife Elizabeth replacing the buddies on the author's road trip roster. The untitled introductory poem to *American Noise* is an unwitting homage to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry of recent decades. A reviewer of Charles Bernstein's volume of selected poems complains that the latter's trademark poem is "a collage of fragments of voices, advertising-speak, detritus. To the extent that it has one, the subject matter [in a Bernstein poem] is usually the opacity of words."[107] What McGrath achieves in the untitled first poem in *American Noise* is exactly such opacity of language, which is all the more surprising since McGrath in general does not consciously want to experiment with language for the sake of experimentation. Instead, he attempts to give an all-encompassing image of American culture in its highbrow-lowbrow diversity and dynamism:

> Boxcars and electric guitars; ospreys, oceans, glaciers, coins;
> the whisper
> of the green corn kachina; the hard sell, the fast buck, casual
> traffic,

106 McGrath, "Dust," 57.

107 Jason Guriel, "Words Fail Him: The Poetry of Charles Bernstein," *Parnassus* 33, nos. 1–2 (2013): 374.

nothing at all; nighthawks of the twenty-four-hour donut shops; maples[108]

The list goes on, the nouns and noun phrases stand for a stream-of-consciousness sequence that covers all of America in the late 1980s-early 1990s, yet what is absent is any trace of the poet's voice. This alone makes the poem an exercise in naming the unnamable:

enflamed by the sugars of autumn; aspens lilting sap yellow and viridian;
concrete communion of the cloverleaves and interchanges; psalms;
sorrow; gold mines, zydeco, alfalfa, 14th Street; sheets of rain across the
hills of Antietam; weedy bundles of black-eyed Susans in the vacant lots
of Baltimore; smell of eggs and bacon at Denny's, outside Flagstaff, 4
A.M.; bindle stiffs; broken glass; the solitary drifter; the sprinklers of
suburbia; protest rallies, rocket launches, traffic jams, swap meets; the
Home Shopping Network hawking cubic zirconium; song of the chainsaw
and the crack of the bat; wheels of progress and mastery; tug boats,
billboards, foghorns, folk songs; pinball machines and mechanical
hearts; brave words spoken in ignorance; dance music from the Union

[108] Campbell McGrath, *American Noise* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1993), n.p.

Hall; knots of migrant workers like buoys among waves or beads in the
green weave of strawberry fields around Watsonville; the faithful touched
by tongues of flame in the Elvis cathedrals of Vegas; wildflowers and
anthracite; smokestacks and sequoias; avenues of bowling alleys and
flamingo tattoos; car alarms, windmills, wedding bells, the blues.[109]

While the list contains many interesting phrases, as a whole, it does not do much beyond providing a voiceless cross-cultural muddle of American items which neither tell a story nor present a palpable emotion or idea. In "Wheatfield under Clouded Sky," McGrath plays with the notion of placing two great European painters in the American cultural landscape. First, Paul Gauguin is imagined as an American artist: "Suppose he left New York and traveled west by train / to the silver fields around Carson City where the water-shaped, salt- and heart-colored rocks / appeased the painter's sensibility and the ghost-veined filaments called his banker's soul to roost."[110] Then Vincent van Gogh is Americanized, "alone in the Dakotas, / subsisting on bulbs and tubers, sketching wildflowers and the sod huts of immigrants as he wanders, / an itinerant prairie mystic, like Johnny Appleseed."[111] While the strategy of putting two great European masters in the American pastoral landscape is interesting, the closure of the poem is marred by McGrath's tin-ear sloppiness and pretension: "Suppose the pattern of wind in the grass could signify a deeper restlessness or the cries of land-locked gulls bespoke the democratic nature of

109 McGrath, *American Noise*, n.p.

110 Campbell McGrath, "Wheatfield Under Clouded Sky," in *American Noise* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1993), 3.

111 McGrath, "Wheatfield Under Clouded Sky," 3.

our solitude."[112] When he suggests that the "veil could be lifted" between the landscape and its representation in art, he unwittingly comments on the opacity of his poem, whose veil of language prevents the direct presentation of the imagined American landscapes transformed by the famous European artists. In another poem from *American Noise*, "Almond Blossoms, Rock and Roll, The Past Seen As Burning Fields," the poet and his buddies do Europe, yet they bring their restless American sensibility along: "For us, all of Spain was like / anywhere else," until he realizes that all travel is ultimately an inward experience: "I don't know if the rush we felt was culturally specific, / though it was the literal noise of our culture we rode / like Vandals or Moors toward a distant sea."[113] The tour of Europe, for young Americans, has always felt like touring an ancient civilization that renders their own a short-historied novelty: "It is America's peculiar gift and burden, this liberation from the shackles of history."[114] Although the second volume brings more of the road trip poems, their language and logic become more credible than the failed poems in *Capitalism*. In "Wheel of Fire, The Mojave," the desert becomes a mirror of the poet's inner struggle to understand life: "I've driven all night toward the basin / of angels. I've driven all night without understanding / anything, need or desire, this desert, neon / signs remorseless as beacons. / I'm talking about America. / I'm talking about loneliness, the thing itself."[115] The vague and noncommittal road tripper of *Capitalism* has matured into a would-be cultural philosopher of the restless American condition. *American Noise* is also a volume of literary homages to McGrath's literary mentors. Of these, the homage to Jack Kerouac is of interest, since it again

112 McGrath, "Wheatfield Under Clouded Sky," 4.

113 Campbell McGrath, "Almond Blossoms, Rock and Roll, The Past Seen As Burning Fields," in *American Noise* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1993), 6.

114 McGrath, "Almond Blossoms, Rock and Roll, the Past Seen as Burning Fields," 7.

115 Campbell McGrath, "Wheel of Fire, the Mojave," in *American Noise* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1993), 10–11.

dramatizes the artificial nature of the poet's emotion. When making a pilgrimage to the grave of Kerouac, their literary hero, the poet and his friend cast a dozen plastic flowers upon his grave, "a wired bouquet we stole from another tombstone."[116] The second part of the Kerouac homage contains a powerful account of the duo's pilgrimage west, again in the footsteps of their Beat model; the poet and his friend make "a wide-eyed arrival at the wild and woolly final frontier: / dharma-bumming the Colorado high country, / pioneering the KOAs, Lewis-and-Clarking the national parks, / Hansel-and-Gretelling up and back to the Great Divide."[117] The thematic range of the poems in *American Noise* is broader than in McGrath's first book, and the author's command of tone, language, and voice are likewise more mature and praiseworthy.

While the first two books by McGrath gave a sense of his ambition to write long poems that provide a sweeping portrait of American culture in its exciting dynamism and diversity, a full-fledged example in this mode only came in the shape of "The Bob Hope Poem," a seventy-page-long composition that was in the making for much of the early 1990s and which forms the backbone of *Spring Comes to Chicago* (1996), the third poetry volume by McGrath. Its length and the presence of narrative makes it a candidate for epic poetry, yet its focus on the individual voice of the poet also justifies its inclusion in the lyric genre. Douglas Barbour considers the contemporary long poem an exercise in using the lyric voice which seeks "to escape the confines of lyric though not necessarily by abandoning all lyric possibilities,"[118] and the potential of the lyric to convey an epic story of a national culture is tested in "The Bob Hope Poem."

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116 Campbell McGrath, "Blue Tulips and Night Train for Jack Kerouac's Grave," in *American Noise* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1993), 28.

117 McGrath, "Blue Tulips and Night Train For Jack Kerouac's Grave," 30–31.

118 Douglas Barbour, *Lyric/Anti-lyric: Essays on Contemporary Poetry* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2001), 7.

The poem is divided into six sections, each being introduced by the description of a snowstorm in Chicago, as experienced by the poet who spends a day at home in his apartment. Although the snowstorm passages should frame the historical sections of the narrative and force the reader into the poem, the language of these sections becomes contrived and unconvincing. This is the very beginning of the poem:

> These elephantine snowflakes sashaying lazily earthward look
> about as likely as three-dollar bills.
> Huge and shambling, avuncular as church-goers, delicately
> laced as linen doilies, fluffy as kittens or cotton swabs,
> linked arm in arm in a ticker-tape parade of paper doll
> Rockettes or lurching like waves of drunken longshoremen[119]

The linguistic profusion is exciting at first sight, yet the meaning gets obscured by what Joel Brouwer calls "self-indulgence partly redeemed by sheer exuberance."[120] The exuberant tone and the inclusive language that tries to incorporate everything are not, however, the only strategies that McGrath employs throughout the poem. In order to change the pace, line length, and tone, McGrath switches back and forth between the high register of descriptive passages in the Whitmanian long lines, as represented by the quote above, to a plain-spoken, short-line commentary on popular culture and his own day spent indoors, assuming the comic mask of an outsider to the lowbrow reading preferences of his wife: "I've been reading about Bob Hope in *People* magazine. / It's my wife who buys it. / I swear."[121] By implication, McGrath

119 Campbell McGrath, "The Bob Hope Poem," *Spring Comes to Chicago* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1996), 9. "The Bob Hope Poem" is hereinafter referred to as "BHP." The volume, and in particular "The Bob Hope Poem," brought McGrath enormous recognition, including generous prizes such as the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Prize and the super-lavish MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" fellowship.

120 Joel Brouwer, "Accordion Music and Raw Profusion," *Parnassus* 26, no. 2 (2002): 171.

121 McGrath, "BHP," 10.

feels superior to the popular entertainment associated with Hope, which is snobbish if taken seriously, or funny if understood as the poet's joke.

In the first section of the poem, "The Secret Life of Capital," the personal voice merges with the public, yet there is little sense of social criticism in McGrath's outward gesture as the tone of wry commentary seems enough. On this lack of engagement in the affairs being portrayed McGrath seems to differ from two other notable leftist predecessors who worked in the long poem format, Hugh MacDiarmid and Thomas McGrath (no relation).[122] McGrath comments on America from the bourgeois middle-class angle, speaking in what Joe Moffett calls "a public voice that in the end only uses Marxism as a tool for making us look closer at ourselves."[123]

Throughout the poem, McGrath juxtaposes the ironic, understated tone of the pragmatic protagonist who rambles around his apartment, trying to kill time and do something useful before it is time to meet his wife in the evening ("I wonder where / that old snow shovel went?")[124] with the comic pretension of an intellectual who admits to liking popular magazines. This preference challenges his authority as a culture critic: "as if I could mitigate my guilt so easily, as if I could deny any act of will or / intention and simply discover its fortuitous presence // there, on the rug, by my chair."[125] The edifice of the critic's reputation is shattered, and the incongruity between the drabness of the occasion and the lofty tone which the poet uses to talk about his time-wasting becomes humorous: "The truth is I've been sitting here for over an hour, feet on the desk, chair / tilted back, drinking black currant

122 MacDiarmid was a Scottish Marxist author, Thomas McGrath an American poet, unjustly marginalized for his leftist views.

123 Joe Moffett, "Beyond the Postmodern Long Poem: Campbell McGrath's 'The Bob Hope Poem,'" 59.

124 McGrath, "BHP," 10.

125 McGrath, "BHP," 11.

tea and reading *People* / while the ubiquitous squirrels frolic and dance and the snowflakes do their / gravitational thing."[126] As soon as the poet moves from talking about his actions and thoughts to describing the snow-plagued world outside his window, his language again becomes awkward ("ubiquitous squirrels") and vague ("their gravitational thing"), which is one of the shortcomings of the poem.[127] As William Logan points out, McGrath has problems with pruning his catalogs of Whitmanian long-line profusion passages, as he "can't bear to leave a single thing out";[128] Stanley Plumly explains that the voice of the contemporary poet, "his way of presiding over his material, whether the intention is to inspire or illuminate, whether the terms are those of a persona or one of a trinity of personal pronouns, is inevitable."[129] Whenever McGrath becomes unsure of his footing, the speaking voice succumbs to the inclusion of unnecessary, maddening, opaque language and imagery.

The real subject of the poem is a meditation on capitalism, American history, and culture. To that end, McGrath utilizes a magazine story involving Bob Hope, who "is in a hot dispute about / a piece of real estate in Southern California."[130] Hope, an American celebrity who wore many hats during the century of his life—comedian, actor, TV show host, golf tournament host,

126 McGrath, "BHP," 10.

127 The worst case of pretentious opacity and vagueness occurs in the following passage from pages 36–37 of the poem: "When I look out my window, when I look not to look but to see, even the most elemental forms and objects are shaded with hermeneutical nuance, / the unsaid, the understood, subtexts half-buried by this blizzard of the incomprehensible, / a world of circumstance and utter contingency invested with a deep and apparent historical sheen." Vague philosophizing is presented as deep meditation on the relationship of reality, vision, surface, and inner substance of things, yet the language here does not match the poet's communicative ambition.

128 William Logan, "Valentine's Day Massacre," *New Criterion* 26, no. 10 (2008): 69.

129 Stanley Plumly, *Argument & Song: Sources & Silences in Poetry* (New York: Handsel, 2003), 165.

130 McGrath, "BHP," 11.

businessman—is portrayed as a ruthless real estate speculator. Though "he's a nonagenarian, he wants that extra twenty-five million bucks / so bad he can taste it."[131] The figure of Bob Hope is, like Jay Gatsby in Fitzgerald's famous novel,[132] a mirror for the expression of the author's ambivalence about success, vanity, and traditional American values such as hard work and upward social mobility. Beside the thematic grounding, the inclusion of the Hope story has a structural function in the poem as well. Hope's real estate deal and the past history of his successful showbiz career provide a frame for the otherwise amorphous poem, whose form oscillates between laconic minimalism and bombastic expansiveness. As David Haven Blake points out, the use of Bob Hope as a celebrity character in the poem serves as an anchor, providing "ironic points of cohesion to an amorphous, shifting society."[133] The disgust that McGrath directs at the senseless greed of the nonagenarian Hope, a celebrity who is supposedly rich beyond any need for more business acquisitions, is used to launch a general diatribe against the impact of money upon American culture. Money is in turn abhorred and loved as "a beautiful metaphor, a poetic analogy, // a diagram, / a model, / a map of the stars"[134] that may give a clue to the question of how American identity is defined. If success and recognition are translated into monetary terms, it indeed "all amounts to the same thing, / which is everything / or nothing, // depending on where you stand."[135] The first section of "The Bob Hope Poem" also sets up the pattern, which is observed in the subsequent sections, of incorporating quotations on the theme of the section, ranging from Marx to

131 McGrath, "BHP," 12.

132 See, for example, F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Collier, 1992). The novel was first published by Scribner's in 1925.

133 David Haven Blake, "Campbell McGrath and the Spectacle Society," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 41, no. 2 (2002): 249.

134 McGrath, "BHP," 14.

135 McGrath, "BHP," 15.

Thoreau, which counterpoint the poet's rant with voices of philosophical distance and authority.[136]

In the second section, "The Triumph of Rationalism," McGrath elaborates on the meaning of Bob Hope in the context of the American history of greed: "What's become of us, / America, / our Bob-ness, our Self-Hope?"[137] The symbolic potential of the surname (i.e., Hope) is not lost upon McGrath, who connects the nonagerian businessman to a range of thoughts on the past and future of American capitalism. And an uneasy future it is, reflected in the poet wondering about the viability of the American cult of the material, along with what Brouwer calls "the orderly chaos that characterizes American culture,"[138] which emerges as the real theme of the poem. The greatest charm of McGrath's voice seems its inclusiveness, its ability to provide a master narrative while at the same time deconstructing that narrative.[139] "The Bob Hope Poem" deals with both the private woes and meditations of the poet himself, as well as with the more public concern about American history and its future. This strategy is best utilized in the third section, "Commodity Fetishism in the White City." The focus on Chicago provides McGrath with a framework to move back and forth between the ironic self-deprecation of the narcissistic poet who takes the discourse of navel-gazing to an extreme ("Let's see now: leftover / Chinese / or liverwurst and swiss?")[140] and the public voice of the poet who is worried by the impossibility of arriving at a unifying interpretation of his native city:

> How can I reconcile my affection with my anger, my need to criticize with my desire to praise?

136 The individual quotations used by McGrath, although too diverse to be quoted in full here, all relate to the subject of money and how it defines what humans perceive as human and cultural in their view of the world.

137 McGrath, "BHP," 25.

138 Brouwer, "Accordion Music and Raw Profusion," 176.

139 Brouwer, "Accordion Music and Raw Profusion," 178.

140 McGrath, "BHP," 29.

If there's only one Chicago, which is it: Thorstein Veblen's or
Milton Friedman's, Gene Debs' or Mayor Daley's,
the White City, the Grey City, the black city abandoned to sift
through the ashes?[141]

When Carl Sandburg pondered, in the 1910s, the cultural meaning of Chicago in his eponymous poem celebrating the city, he could still draw on Whitmanian optimism about the viability, progress, and enviable vigor of the metropolis of the Midwest: "Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning."[142] McGrath, writing in the 1990s, is more pessimistic about the future of urban development. His way of dealing with the predicament of late-20th-century Chicago is by humorous undercutting through the example of a castle made of sand, the short-lived White City, a utopian model built as the center of The Chicago World's Fair of 1893. McGrath compares its cultural importance to that of American fast-food and entertainment icons:

If the 7–11 is a minnow, and Wal-Mart a bluefin tuna, the
White City was Moby Dick.
If the 7–11 is a slot machine, and Wal-Mart a bingo parlor, the
White City was Las Vegas.[143]

The link between popular entertainment and a great American novel is a typical strategy that McGrath employs to sustain his ambition to be "a spectator, a voyeur, and a knowing but ardent participant in the American simulacrum."[144]

In the fourth section, "Road to Utopia," the highbrow and low-brow interpretations of American culture again merge as McGrath

141 McGrath, "BHP," 42.
142 Carl Sandburg, "Chicago," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 3, no. 6 (1914): 192.
143 McGrath"BHP," 38.
144 Blake, "Campbell McGrath and the Spectacle Society," 252.

explores the story of a 1940s film starring Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, and Dorothy Lamour. The film was one of the several "Road to" romantic music adventure comedies that the trio made. Bringing up the subject of (Bob) Hope again, McGrath asks the fundamental question about the meaning of Hope's celebrity to the masses: "What is it people see in Bob Hope? Or saw? Or found reflected? Or hoped to find?"[145] From the film utopias of the 1940s Hope-Crosby-Lamour films McGrath jumps to a mock-prophetic passage in which he muses, observing the approach of the mailman, on the possibility of receiving mail that would catapult his literary career toward stardom comparable with Bob Hope: "Imagine what stamped benediction, what metered mark of grace he might be bringing me today: // good word from Hollywood about my screenplay; / a Guggenheim; / a genius grant; / an NEA!"[146] McGrath extends the outrageous fantasy to picture himself in the privileged position of Hope, as the next celebrity (a writer, in his case) covered by the press: "Isn't that my picture / on the cover / of *People* magazine! // But wait. / Hold on a minute. What would I do if it all came true?"[147] The solemn preacher and the playful jester converge in McGrath's attempt to make both tonal extremes meet: "I am a veritable / Walt Whitman / of ambivalence."[148] This is a central assertion in the poem—McGrath treats the subject of Hope's celebrity with a mixture of fascination, repulsion, envy, and irony. Moreover, throughout the poem, McGrath gladly succumbs to the illusion of speaking for the whole of culture, which W.H. Auden warned against, claiming that the American poet plays with fire as he or she "feels that the whole responsibility for contemporary

145 McGrath, "BHP," 43.

146 McGrath, "BHP," 45. In McGrath's life, this rise to poetic stardom that he jokes about here actually happened—following the success of *Spring Comes to Chicago*, he was showered with the most lavish prizes and fellowships available to American poets—for example, he received the prestigious Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award and the MacArthur Fellowship (also dubbed the "genius grant").

147 McGrath, "BHP," 46.

148 McGrath, "BHP," 46.

poetry has fallen upon his shoulders, that he is a literary aristocracy of one."[149] As a poet-narcissist by necessity as well as choice, McGrath dons the mask of a typical twentieth-century urban intellectual who, according to Christopher Lasch," seeks neither individual self-aggrandizement nor spiritual transcendence but peace of mind, under conditions that increasingly militate against it."[150] American poetry has always been a proudly democratic field, and McGrath gives the reader a wink, putting his ambivalent attitude about the poem's explanation of America straight, for, despite all the ironic undercutting of the materialist dream mythology he admits that "utopianism / is an / American tradition"[151] that may include the socialist theories of Marx as well as the business acumen of Bob Hope in a single, multivocal narrative.

The weakest part of the poem, considering the thematic layout, seems to be the fifth section, which juxtaposes passages on the cargo cults of the Pacific with the ineffable ways in which the American "system" of society, business, and culture seems to work. Still, the ironic detachment helps McGrath to find a way out of being swamped by his subject as he wonders how "to encompass such / magnitude when even this single city block denies me?"[152] The most convincing part of this section is the story of the son and his father watching

> the Marx Brothers on our black-and-white TV, my introduction
> to the zeitgeist and the language that would claim me,
>
> the razzledazzle of the multicultural demotic,
> the sacred vernacular of the absurd[153]

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149 W.H. Auden, "American Poetry," *The Dyer's Hand, and Other Essays* (London: Faber, 1987), 366.

150 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, Norton: 1991), 13.

151 McGrath, "BHP," 46.

152 McGrath, "BHP," 58.

153 McGrath, "BHP," 64.

McGrath again assumes the ambivalent attitude to products of American popular culture—on the one hand, the Marx Brothers comedies provide a link to precious time spent with his father, on the other hand, these films are no longer part of McGrath's adult, literary consciousness, and the only way to express this double-faced state is to undercut his intellectualism with a "razzledazzle," or ostentatious showing, of language.

The elegiac closure of the poem is supplied in the sixth and final section. A day in the life of the poet draws to a close as he finally finds the old snow shovel and wields it "like a sword, like a staff, / like a sign"[154] of late diligence. The wisecracking sensibility shines in the haiku commentary on what happens on the street below: "Look now—joggers! / In this snow! Serious sickness, / or just fucked up?"[155] The snowstorm is finally treated with a metaphysical precision of language and logic that rectifies the opacity of the previous sections: "If no man is an island, who's to say an island is?"[156] The linguistic exuberance hits the mark when McGrath considers the earth to resemble a "cog in the solar archipelago, the sun a snowflake in the blizzard of the galaxy."[157] The focal point is a prescient elegy for Bob Hope, the venerated figure whom the poet imagines to have "gone to fetch his eternal reward, / retired at last to vaudeville Valhalla, that heavenly Pro-Am, that neverending celebrity roast in the sky,"[158] equating Hope the man with hope the generic American feeling, shared by the poet and his fellow-Americans, for the future of the cultural experiment. The presumption of the lasting legacy of Bob Hope, the "mad jester of cultural hegemony"[159] who represents the core American values such as hard work, thrift, sociability, and business drive, is,

154 McGrath, "BHP," 76.
155 McGrath, "BHP," 69.
156 McGrath, "BHP," 70.
157 McGrath, "BHP," 70.
158 McGrath, "BHP," 73.
159 McGrath, "BHP," 73.

ultimately, contained in the final line of the poem, notable for its use of double entendre: "Hope springs eternal."[160]

Although "The Bob Hope Poem" has been linked to earlier sweeping poetic statements about American culture by Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac,[161] a major problem of the poem is the way McGrath undermines the tone with his voice. When he jokes about being a postmodern Chicago-based Whitman, it is not the large, all-encompassing, voice of a prophet speaking on behalf of American culture and people. Rather, McGrath tries to present his reading of America as "a world predestined for oblivion and loss," yet it is a world that is "alive with the promise of transformation and renewal."[162] By carefully juxtaposing myths of American history with icons of American popular culture and the everyday realities of urban middle-class life, McGrath keeps the poem together by asking the reader to participate in his effort to call American culture an eclectic system which "revolves around faith" in its achievement in the context of the highbrow/lowbrow foundations of American society.[163]

In *Road Atlas: Prose & Other Poems* (1999), McGrath revisits the poetics of restless traveling across America and several exotic places (e.g., Vanuatu) that he earlier explored in *Capitalism* and *American Noise*. His method is again the prose poem, his approach to the content of his poems one of a distant, uncommitted observer. By equating prose with poetry he tries to make the best of both genres, drawing on a mixture of the epic and lyric potential of each. The generous form of the prose poem, moreover, allows McGrath to transcend the formal limitations of traditional

160 McGrath, "BHP," 77.

161 Brouwer, "Accordion Music and Raw Profusion," 171.

162 McGrath, "BHP," 77.

163 The highbrow/lowbrow terminology, a product of the paradigm shift in culture studies since the 1980s, was notably applied to American history and culture by Lawrence Levine. See his *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

poetry (such as rhyme, meter, and line-breaks) while making use of the virtues that have more commonly been associated with prose. In "The Prose Poem," which introduces *Road Atlas*, the image of a pronounced boundary line between two fields where two different crops are being grown by two different farmers becomes a starting point for the poet's exuberant plunge into the depths of linguistic expression of place and self: "On the map it is precise and rectilinear as a chessboard, through driving past you would hardly notice it, this boundary line or ragged margin, a shallow swale that cups a simple trickle of water, less rill than rivulet, more gully than dell, a tangled ditch grown up throughout with a fearsome assortment of wildflowers and bracken."[164] The unusual tone of sensuous generosity towards an agricultural landscape contributes to the poem's rhetorical success, despite the poet's design of the poem as an artifice that uses the outer landscape as a reflection of the inner self, a rare achievement if compared to McGrath's mostly impersonal landscape and travel poems: "You've passed this way yourself many times, and can tell me, if you would, do the formal fields end where the valley begins, or does everything that surrounds us emerge from its embrace?"[165] The form allows McGrath to navigate between a tone of meditation on ideas deeper than the poet's intelligence and a romantic tradition of letting the self be transformed in a moment of epiphanic revelation of meaning. Andrew Zawacki argues that the prose poem as a hybrid form "neither sprawls in luxury nor suffers under diminishment, yet it maintains the emotive responses (the "lyric moment") to both: it can accommodate transcendence and pathos alike."[166] In McGrath's version, the prose poem becomes the fruitful middle ground between a cornfield and a field of wheat, between poetry

164 Campbell McGrath, "The Prose Poem," in *Road Atlas: Prose & Other Poems* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1999), 1.

165 McGrath, "The Prose Poem," 1.

166 Andrew Zawacki, "Accommodating Commodity: The Prose Poem," *Antioch Review* 58, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 294.

and prose, partaking of both spheres; the prose poem resembles the "ragged margin" between the two fields in "The Prose Poem" that shares elements of wild growth and cultivated crops, nature and culture, being a human construction that is, like a prose poem, "possessed of a beauty all its own."[167]

In "Plums," McGrath revisits the theme of homage to an American poet. There are two interlocked strands to the poem—first, a personal reminiscence of a road trip across the continent which got frozen in an epiphanic moment, with McGrath "sitting on a hill in Nebraska, in morning sunlight, looking out across the valley of the Platte River."[168] The poet feels unified with the landscape, the identification with a nation of habitual drivers, professional or not, speeding down the interstate stretching in the valley below: "Barrel music rises up from the traffic on I–80, strings of long-haul truckers rolling west, rolling east, the great age of the automobile burning down before my eyes, a thing of colossal beauty and thoughtlessness."[169] Temporal progression is momentarily suspended and McGrath conveys the effect of a Wordsworthian "spot of time" whose original pastoral grounding becomes, however, very much industrialized, commercialized, American.[170] What mars the otherwise exuberant American poem of the open road is McGrath's subsequent use of themes and

167 McGrath, "The Prose Poem," 1.

168 Campbell McGrath, "Plums," in *Road Atlas: Prose & Other Poems* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1999), 5.

169 McGrath, "Plums," 5.

170 The original passage by William Wordsworth which, more than any other literary text, gave rise to scholarly examinations of epiphany in fiction and poetry in the last thirty years by introducing the concept of time as suspended in a moment of secular epiphany, is taken from *The Prelude* and reads as follows: "There are in our existence spots of time / Which with distinct preeminence retain / A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed / By trivial occupations and the round / Of ordinary intercourse, our minds— / Especially the imaginative power— / Are nourished and invisibly repaired." See William Wordsworth, *The Pedlar: Tintern Abbey: The Two-Part Prelude*, ed.Jonathan Wordsworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 51.

imagery taken from several poems by William Carlos Williams, most notably the use of plums from Williams's "This Is Just to Say":[171] "So much depends upon the image: chickens, asphodel, a numeral, a seashell";[172] McGrath tries to sit on too many chairs in "Plums", incorporating the poetics of the open road, the minimalist domestic intimacy of the Williams short lyric, and the romantic attitude in the tradition of Wordsworth that emphasizes the importance of moments of revelation as primary structuring agents of a poem that, moreover, manages to juxtapose McGrath's youthful and middle-class selves in fruitful conversation: "Who am I to speak for that younger vision of myself, atop a hill in Nebraska, bathed in morning light? I was there. I bore witness to that moment. I heard it pass, touched it, tasted its mysterious essence. I bear it with me even now, an amulet smooth as a fleshless fruit stone."[173] The poem's closure marks an unwanted departure from the vision upon a hill as McGrath heavy-handedly drives the allusion to Williams home again: "Plums. // I have stolen your image, Williams Carlos Williams. Forgive me. They were delicious, so sweet and so cold."[174] Such a closure of "Plums" is too explicit, bowing too easily to the Williams original, exposing the way a parody can go wrong and ridiculous, meeting the criteria for what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls a disappointing poem conclusion that happens when the final lines of the poem do not surprise or move the reader but, rather, foil the reader's propensity for being surprised and moved by the ending.[175] *Road Atlas* contains more homages to McGrath's literary models, all of which are similarly disappointing in the poet's clumsy appropriation of the facts of

171 For the original Williams poem about eating a plum, see William Carlos Williams, "This Is Just to Say," in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. 1, *1909–1939* (New York: New Directions, 1986), 372.

172 McGrath, "Plums," 5.

173 McGrath, "Plums," 6.

174 McGrath, "Plums," 6.

175 See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 213.

life from these models. "Sylvia Plath" ends as follows: "And then the leap, the pall of heaven, ruddy blood, an open oven. // 1963. London."[176] "Letter to James Wright" is a jumble of allusions to the book titles of the older poet and random notes taken by McGrath during the younger poet's sojourn in Italy (a country where both poets spent some time). Perhaps an unwitting funny moment happens in the middle of the poem, an admission that is typically American when it comes to appreciating European culture and sights: "What is the name of this castle? // I've misplaced the map."[177] Without a map to the poet's emotions about anything, including places, he prefers to avoid taking emotional stances in his poems altogether.

Road Atlas is rich in travel poems about revisiting a town or landscape first covered in the early road trips of the poet and his buddies. "Baker, California" is McGrath's attempt to cast a mature eye on the youthful period of seeking Beat-like enlightenment by the gallon. This time, he takes along his wife Elizabeth, trying to revisit, and resist, the staple American "suburbs of loneliness, isolated galaxies of vitriol and salt" in an effort to reach the Wordsworthian transcendence he felt he was denied in his youth, and to share it, in order to retrace a past moment when the night becomes "a property of vision, a kind of violent light, sheer and lapidary, gas stations, restaurants, assembled legions of last chance motels, nothingness amid the nothingness of everything and nothing."[178] The gesture is interesting, but the attempt to relive a past stay at an isolated motel with his wife ("there was nothing I could say or do to convince her how terrible this place was") fails since throughout the poem she remains a passive object that is

176 Campbell McGrath, "Sylvia Plath," in *Road Atlas: Prose & Other Poems* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1999), 27.

177 Campbell McGrath, "Letter to James Wright," in *Road Atlas: Prose & Other Poems* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1999), 46.

178 Campbell McGrath, "Baker, California," in *Road Atlas: Prose & Other Poems* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1999), 7.

barely mentioned and does not respond to anything in the story. Ultimately, McGrath realizes that he has changed as much as the place he portrays, or not at all, for "Baker, California, is not hell, though it bears a family resemblance."[179] The rare humor of this line is followed with a journalistic connection to a forest fire in another Baker, in Oregon. The tragedy seen on TV is ignored by the protagonists of the poem, who instead focus on their own experience of the dry heat which "sucked the night's memory from our lungs."[180] The sensory perception of the desert surrounding the Baker motel is overwhelming in its fiery presence: "Heat shimmers hissed audibly as they rose in swells to fuse with the roar of traffic and vanish in the colorless vacancy of the sky. Song of the oven of days. Song of the soul in the furnace of the body."[181]

Road Atlas also contains numerous poems of travel to foreign locations, such as "Praia dos Orixas," "Dinosaurs," "Amsterdam," and "Mountainair, New Mexico," which may be summed up as lengthy prose-like journal entries about the poet's travels which are of little interest to the outsider. An exception is "Yogurt & Clementines," in which McGrath tries to internalize the city of Tunis. The effort, however, falls flat because his sensibility precludes the possibility of learning about other cultures without exporting the set of American stereotypes about himself as a global exporter of American identity. In Tunis, whose history baffles McGrath and whose linguistic difficulty annoys him, the poet resorts to an egocentric account of his eating out, as this is the only thing that makes sense to him in "a neighborhood place among passageways of date palms, clean and friendly, where I am catered to like a meteorite crash-landed in the courtyard."[182] In a Proustian leap of poetic faith, "suddenly everything is washed away—dust of the Sahara upon my tongue,

179 McGrath, "Baker, California," 8.

180 McGrath, "Baker, California," 8.

181 McGrath, "Baker, California," 9.

182 Campbell McGrath, "Yogurt & Clementines," in *Road Atlas: Prose & Other Poems* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1999), 10.

odor of sour clove at the heart of the medina, the alienation of foreign currency, the sorrow of the alley cats among the ruins of Carthage, its weird light and fragmented crypts, headless torsos, fields sewn with salt, exile and loss, even my harrowing loneliness redeemed by a saucer of sweet and liquid yogurt."[183] Unfortunately, there is no sense of McGrath trying to understand the foreign city and its people, yet the poem's ending redeems the habitual self-centeredness of the poet with a lovely detail from the animal world as he observes "an inchworm marking the course of his dinner, gratefully, undisturbed, mouthful by tiny mouthful."[184] Even this phrase betrays the poet's ears of tin as using "mouthful" twice in short succession is a tongue-twister line whose sound is cacophony.

In *Road Atlas*, as was the case with the earlier volumes, McGrath seems to succeed in poems that are most unlike his typical prose poem style of noncommittal road tripping away from himself. This time, his rare rhetorical accomplishment comes in "Rice & Beans," a loving portrait, in simple diction, of a funny conversation the poet has with his son. The father keeps forcing his point upon the child, which is to have the son finish his meal while the son keeps resisting the parental authority with a series of naive, childlike, endearing questions:

> "Dad?" Yes. "You are a wimp." That's very nice, thank you. Eatyour grilled cheese. "I say You are a *little* wimp. I learn that at school. From a *big* kid." Of course. "Tyrannosaurus Rex, King of the Dinosaurs!" Sam is not yet three. When he roars I stick a spoonful of rice and beans into his mouth. "Dad, did Rex eat ricey-beans?" I think so. "No! He was a *meat* eater."[185]

183 McGrath, "Yogurt & Clementines," 10.

184 McGrath, "Yogurt & Clementines," 10.

185 McGrath, "Rice & Beans," in *Road Atlas: Prose & Other Poems* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1999), 19.

The son's sequence of fascinating, inquisitive questions, framed by quotation marks, is interspersed with the poet's replicas, which resemble an internal monolog. The father reacts with sober annoyance to the son's childish excitement at making new and surprising mental connections between different concepts. The diction of "Rice & Beans" (of which only the first third is quoted above) is perfectly realistic, credible, and pertinent to the occasion, which is a very rare achievement in McGrath's oeuvre since his typical penchant for overblown language is completely suspended for the duration of the poem. John Keats claims that real poetry "should be great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject."[186] That is, Keats calls for the use of a transparent style in poetry which does not call too much attention to itself but rather lets the subject of the poem shine through the medium of language. In the poetry of McGrath, however, language all too often calls undesirable attention to itself, its capacity for pretension, portentousness, snobbery, overwriting, and thinking big where small would be better.

In *Road Atlas*, however, McGrath's approach to the subject matter of American culture, place, and landscape is more mature, and there is less sense of travel done as adolescent rebellion against American middle-class society that was so foregrounded in the earlier volumes. The poet's traveling buddies are replaced by his wife and sons, and the restless, pointless impulse to travel across the country is replaced with the impulse to revisit the old haunts seen a decade or two earlier. A good example of revisiting the earlier culture poems is "Capitalist Poem #42," which is a mature take on the youthful poetry that focused on the ills of capitalist consumerism: "While Elizabeth shops at Costco, Sam and I play

[186] John Keats, "On the Aims of Poetry: Letter to J.H. Reynolds, 3 February 1815," *Selections from Keats's Letters (1817)*, *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, accessed January 17, 2014, www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237836?page=2.

hide & seek / among the bales and pallets in that vast warehouse of pure things."[187] In his typical manner, McGrath is more at home cataloging the products sold at the warehouse than dealing with human characters. The rest of the poem is a rhetorical denial of his own becoming a model suburban conformist happy shopper: "Believe me, what little we do buy [followed by a list of items stretching eight lines] is as nothing to what we leave behind, / the merest anthill against the Great Pyramid of Cheops, / a sidewalk crevice compared to that Grand Canyon of commodities. / Bright laughter, summer skies. So they descend into the abyss."[188] To detail all one's items of shopping and compare them to the achievements of the early civilizations and to the natural wonder of the Grand Canyon testifies to McGrath's persistent delusion of himself as poetic divinity, interesting because he represents a model American, unless this logic is taken as satire on the commercialized consciousness of the poet.

"Campbell McGrath", the eponymous closing poem of *Road Atlas*, is perhaps the poet's most ambitious cross-country travel poem of the 1990s. Yet, as Brouwer complains, there is a strange element of non-human vacuity related to McGrath's appropriation of places in his travel poems. In "Campbell McGrath," Brouwer identifies a critical lack of the human element as there are virtually no people in the poem as McGrath rejects the Whitmanian identification with multitudes of American strangers as he, rather, in the closing poem of *Road Atlas* and elsewhere, presents the country as "a lavish set emptied of actors."[189] While the conceit of "Campbell McGrath," of himself travelling from Florida to Alaska on a map with stops at places which were selected on the basis of having the same name as the poet's first name (i.e., Campbell) or surname (i.e., McGrath), seems fresh and amusing, the language chosen for

187 Campbell McGrath, "Capitalist Poem #42," in *Road Atlas: Prose & Other Poems* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1999), 63.

188 McGrath, "Capitalist Poem #42," 63.

189 Brouwer, "Accordion Music and Raw Profusion," 186.

the portrayal of this long imaginary journey again lets McGrath down: "Thumbing the road atlas, I imagine that ultimate voyage, / transcontinental, multinational, taken the long way on the diagonal, / Florida to Alaska, because there are many Campbells / but only one McGrath."[190] The propensity for overblown diction soon overwhelms the poem: "Unfathomable road trip. Frigid, Stygian destination. / And a beginning, here and now, raveled twine humid and umbilical, / point of embarkation for the labyrinth of the nominal, / here and now, in hot and floral Campbell, Florida."[191] McGrath's "labyrinth of the nominal" is as abstract and pretentious as can be, yet it seems the poet is happy with the communicative aspect of such language, or really unaware of this effect, and that is all. The ending of McGrath's curious road trip across the map of the country echoes the rhetoric of the travel poems of metaphysical transformation: "There, where the road ends, the real journey begins."[192] Indeed, for an introspective poet such as Theodore Roethke, travel in poetry was not physical movement to far-off places, which is what the Beats and McGrath celebrate. Instead, the Roethkean poet would go into the depths of the self, seeking out the Emersonian ideal of imagined travel that requires hardly any outward explicit movement and transportation: "All journeys, I think, are the same. / The movement is forward, after a few wavers, / And for a while we are all alone, / Busy, obvious with ourselves."[193] Despite the promising closure of "Campbell McGrath," the poet has reached the beginning of the real poem, unwritten here, about the many different North American towns that share the same name and one's potential for identification with these unfamiliar places. Sadly, the real poem is not given but

190 Campbell McGrath, "Campbell McGrath," in *Road Atlas: Prose & Other Poems* (Hopewell: Ecco, 1999), 71.

191 McGrath, "Campbell McGrath," 71.

192 McGrath, "Campbell McGrath," 71.

193 Theodore Roethke, "First Meditation," in *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (New York: Anchor, 1975), 152.

left on the level of implication, so the poem's refusal to communicate resembles the archetypal descent of the 1960s and 1970s into the realm of linguistic vagueness and thematic vacuity that the deep image poets subscribed to then. Brouwer notes the importance of travel in McGrath's poetry as the poet "frequently uses past travel experiences to make sense of his present concern and circumstances."[194] Yet inspiration by place names found in the road atlas is not matched by corresponding attention to developing the lyric and dramatic potential of the different Campbells spread across the North American continent. The names of towns remain just bits of language for McGrath and he refuses to commit to them with any sincerity, or indeed, with any palpable emotion. To attempt an emotionless poem of skyhigh ambition which is to speak for all seems a painful failure of the poet's rhetoric, all the more sad because of the remarkable thematic ingenuity that McGrath has always displayed. Joel Brouwer argues the problem with McGrath's poetry is one of the poet's attitude rather than his lack of skills: "McGrath neither intellectually nor emotionally engages with anything he "sees" on his imaginary road trip. He ably describes the passing landscapes, but you couldn't say whether he cares about any of it."[195] Robert Miltner claims that the travel poems by McGrath hide a positive meaning to "the growing sense of space, of national and personal identity. In the space through which he travels, McGrath observes both the residue of traditional Americana as found in its isolated provincial towns and the pop culture simulacra that pass today for the trappings and wrapping of what this nation has become."[196] There is a plenitude of far-off places, towns, and landscapes in McGrath's poetry, from

194 Brouwer, "Accordion Music and Raw Profusion," 189.

195 Brouwer, "Accordion Music and Raw Profusion," 186.

196 Robert Miltner, "Imagining Geography: Campbell McGrath's Road Trips, Travelogues, and the Narrative Prose Poem," in *The Contemporary Narrative Poem: Critical Crosscurrents*, ed. Steven P. Schneider (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 67.

Capitalism to *Road Atlas*, yet they are not put to any empathetic, emotionally charged use. It is as if dropping place names itself was enough for a poem to move the reader. In poems such as "Campbell McGrath," the poet calls attention to the poetic artifice of the moment rather than giving a persuasive illusion of travel as epiphanic transformation of the self.

In McGrath's poems about America, his buddies, his wife Elizabeth, his sons, and numerous strangers are featured. Yet, as Brouwer explains, these people "appear in the poems, but never become characters: they're props, of a piece with the restaurants, garages, shores, boats, fields, and bars they occupy."[197] On the one hand, McGrath tries to populate his poems with numerous people, places, and experiences. On the other, all of these are just mentioned, not charged with any emotion, voice of the speaker, or drama of the situation being portrayed. Ultimately, as Brouwer points out, the paradox of McGrath's ambivalence about being personal in his Americana poems makes him use "thickly populated events and places: museums, movies, amusement parks, bars, beaches, restaurants, and so forth."[198] Yet, the overwhelming diversity of these public settings does not translate into a poetry of emotional involvement in McGrath's case as he seems "quite alone in these crowds, [and indeed even in intimate situations with friends and family, my note] a recording angel taking it all in but not participating, not touching or being touched."[199] This failure to connect with the landscapes, towns, people, and human stories he mentions makes McGrath a sadly failed writer and someone who does not, after all, build on the rich American tradition of travel and iconoclasm that was paved earlier by Whitman, Kees, Kerouac, Ginsberg, and other poets of the open road.

Overall, McGrath's extensive traveling experience might, in itself, be transformed into moving and memorable poems. But

197 Brouwer, "Accordion Music and Raw Profusion," 187.
198 Brouwer, "Accordion Music and Raw Profusion," 187.
199 Brouwer, "Accordion Music and Raw Profusion," 187.

his poetic propensity for overwriting, which bubbles up at any given time, to abuse language into heavy-handed, intellectualized, pretentious diction, to make ornate and complicated where simple and concise would do, make such extensive traveling experience opaque, boring, and maddening. McGrath has wisely chosen the form of the prose poem for his profusion of words that are mostly ill-matched to the American reality he tries to portray. If he were to write fiction, such a use of language would put off the reader within seconds, while in the prose poem, any awkward image, pretentious comment on the landscape, feeling, or emotion, may somehow belong as the form itself is such a baggy, tolerant monster.

The poetry of Campbell McGrath has proven an extremely ambitious, although largely failed, experiment in finding a proper style and language for the poet's omnibus tragicomic vision of himself and the American landscape and culture of the past and present. His rejection of formal arrangement in favor of prose poem sloppiness and verbosity and perhaps even an inability to realize his linguistic ineptitude bog down an otherwise admirable literary project of a poet passionately immersed in American culture, its history, and its recent lowbrow development. While he is able to adopt the comic persona of a Whitmanian braggart and Dickinsonian self-deprecator, the other two elements of postwar comic poetry—the ability to set up credible comic situations and comic use of language—are almost absent from his work. "I'm plowing the runway, I'm building a reef, I'm prospecting for gold, I'm rowing for the promise of a distant shore", says the autobiographical speaker of "The Bob Hope Poem."[200] Unfortunately, McGrath has denied himself the chance of reaching the poetic Parnassus with a style that strangely craves recognition on the grounds of formal and linguistic accomplishment; he is ever resistant to weighing each word and phrase more carefully against

200 McGrath, "BHP," 75.

their sound, rhythm, and register. When youthful exuberance overrules McGrath's penchant for overwriting, moments of supremely comic and wise commentary on American culture are often achieved, as in a Chicago-based poem in which the speaker wonders about the suitability of a place to eat on the merit of its literary allusiveness exaggerated to a funny extreme: "then there's one / at which I never ate though it looked absolutely irreplaceable, the Golden Angel Pancake House, / which is a poem by Rilke I've never read / though I've used its restroom."[201] The early poetry of McGrath is dominated by the outrageous stances against cultural clichés that change between social criticism and farce, and the poet's unwieldy use of language makes his work amount to the same thing he attributes to money in American culture, a vaguely perceived concept, sometimes effective, sometimes maddening, yet always relevant, whose presence has dominated one's American identity, the sense of belonging to the culture of "What-the-Hey-Mart"[202] worship, as being defined by the shallowness and temporality of such a culture's memory and achievement, giving in to "the smoke of whose burning we live out our lives."[203]

201 Campbell McGrath, "The Golden Angel Pancake House," in *Spring Comes to Chicago* (New York: Ecco, 1996), 5.

202 McGrath, "BHP," 35.

203 McGrath, "BHP," 15.

Tony Hoagland: The Poetry of Ironic Self-Deprecation

Tony Hoagland (b. 1953) is an important younger American poet whose career commenced in the late 1980s. While he is hardly a prolific author, Hoagland's poems have nonetheless attracted considerable attention from critics, as well as readers and audiences.[1] He is the author of four full-length books of poetry—*Sweet Ruin* (1992), *Donkey Gospel* (1998), *What Narcissism Means to Me* (2003), and *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty* (2010).[2] In addition, he has been a regular contributor of insightful critical essays about contemporary poetry which were collected in *Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft* (2006).

Hoagland has worked in the mode of wisecracking, exuberant, anecdotal lyric poetry with dark undertones. William Logan attributes the success of Hoagland's poetry to his being one of the more accomplished "practitioners of gentle humor, sometimes with a gentle dash of the gently surreal, who have given American verse a New Age school of stand-up comedians."[3] Hoagland's ideological framework is what Steven Cramer called a "sturdy, practical" version of Romanticism.[4] Moreover, in addition to the focus on subjectivity and the impulse to deal with the failure of the American cult of success, Hoagland has also written about popular and highbrow culture, love, sex, masculinity, gender, drugs, rock music, freedom, identity, relationships, nature, loneliness,

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1 Because of the entertaining, stand-up comedy nature of many of his poems, Hoagland is a favorite featured poet at poetry readings on the American college poetry reading circuit.

2 The publication of *Sweet Ruin* was really preceded by three chapbooks. These are *A Change in Plans* (1985), *Talking to Stay Warm* (1986), and *History of Desire* (1990).

3 William Logan, "Trampling Out the New Vintage," *New Criterion* 28, no. 10 (2010): 62.

4 See Steven Cramer, review of *Sweet Ruin*, by Tony Hoagland, *Ploughshares* 18, no. 4 (1992–93): 236–37.

and loss. In an early critical appreciation of Hoagland, Peter Harris attempts to account for the likeable nature of Hoagland's poetry. Although the format of Hoagland's poems is conventional, a free verse lyric ranging from one to three pages, his choice of a stanzaic division favoring the short line and short stanza, the rhetorical manipulation of content in these poems is nothing short of remarkable. Harris considers Hoagland to be "a master of beginnings" who "typically starts a poem off with a mixture of manic flamboyance, wild tropes, and a sure, quick-paced sense of dramatic timing."[5] This approach is a winner with the audiences of poetry readings at American universities, which are the venues that have for decades constituted the main audience for most American poetry.[6] Setting up the reader's expectations with an outrageous situation or statement at the beginning of the poem, however, requires a subsequent elaboration of the poem's rhetoric into a persuasive voice of the speaking subject which typically "modulates as the poem moves into orbit in the upper atmosphere of lyrical, or philosophical mediation."[7]

An example of Hoagland's trademark construction of the poem as a shocker that is followed by a tragicomic meditation on a serious theme is "My Country." Hoagland opens the poem with an outrageous situation intended to shock, as well as entertain with its comic exaggeration:

> When I think of what I know about America,
> I think of kissing my best friend's wife
> in the parking lot of the zoo one afternoon.[8]

5 Peter Harris, "Poetry Chronicle: An Extravagant Three: New Poetry by Mitchell, Hoagland, and Gallagher," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 69, no. 4 (1993): 695.

6 For a brief history of twentieth-century poetry reading, see, for example, Donald Hall, "The Poetry Reading: Public Performance/Private Art," *American Scholar* 54, no. 1 (1985): 63–77.

7 Harris, "Poetry Chronicle," 696.

8 Tony Hoagland, "My Country," in *Sweet Ruin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 9.

The promise of the first line to deliver an interpretation of American culture is shattered by the description of the kissing and subsequent foreplay that supposedly took place between the speaker-poet and a friend's wife in the public place of the parking lot. Their transgression is likened to "a kind of / patriotic act, / pledging our allegiance to the pleasure / and not the consequence."[9] While the presentation of the fondling as a patriotic act that, like real patriotism, requires some pledging, is so bizarre it gets comical, the use of the zoo environment for the background intensifies the absurd nature of the imagined meeting as the lovers start "burning our bridges and making our bed / to an orchestra of screaming birds // and the smell of elephant manure."[10] This passage shows another likeable aspect of Hoagland's poetry—his comic imagination renders absurd the sudden impulse of the speaker and, at the same time, questions the validity of the assumptions that Americans harbor about their sense of morality. The poem is not a mere comic celebration of adultery. The voice of puritan judgment is ever present in the speaker's recollection of the scene as he ruefully remembers the husband of the woman, a friend whose innocence "shouldn't be betrayed."[11] The description of the illicit fondling goes on and so does the author's comic juxtaposition of the mystery of the female body to an unknown town:

> I slipped my hand inside her shirt and felt
> my principles blinking out behind me
> like streetlights in a town where I had never
>
> lived, to which I never intended to return.
> And who was left to speak of what had happened?
> And who would ever be brave, or lonely,
>
> or free enough to ask?[12]

9 Hoagland, "My Country," 9.
10 Hoagland, "My Country," 9.
11 Hoagland, "My Country," 9.
12 Hoagland, "My Country," 9–10.

These closing words of "My Country" vaguely echo the United States' national anthem, yet the story of imagined adultery in a public space is very distant from the patriotic promise that was suggested by the poem's title. Unlike the defenders of Fort McHenry in the War of 1812, the lovers in Hoagland's poem behave in selfish, animalistic fashion, and the blackout of their rationality is questioned by the parental voice of the speaker's consciousness. The final series of defensive rhetorical questions are meant to justify the immoral action by deflecting the lovers' guilt towards an indictment of the imagined judge of their behavior. "My Country" suggests breaking the rules is the American norm, animal instincts prevailing over the urge to keep up appearances.

The poem's title and the exploration of patriotic language suggest that this is an archetypal American story as noble principles and values have come to be mocked and betrayed on a habitual basis. What saves "My Country" is the poet's comic deflation of the seriousness of lust and patriotism and the incongruity of mixing both emotions. In a place that is adjacent to the zoo animals and their sounds and smells, any sexual proceedings between people become comic as the humans' fondling is juxtaposed with the background music of the zoo animals. In the comparison, Hoagland emphasizes the presence of the animal, instinctual side of human nature that even cultural repression has not managed to obliterate.

Far from being a one-dimensional jester of the American white middle-class suburban world, Hoagland is also a notable poet of the open road who has addressed the failure of the American Dream. When Walt Whitman called for setting out, "afoot and light-hearted," on a spiritual as well as physical journey towards enlightenment,[13] he could not have predicted that the automobile would come to take over as the instrument of that journey

[13] See Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," in *Walt Whitman, Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 297.

in twentieth-century American poetry. "Perpetual Motion" by Hoagland starts with the dramatization of the perennial traveling impulse of the American poet. Dreaming of the freedom that a driver feels when taking hold of the steering wheel, he tries to explore and understand the meaning of the solitary car drive phenomenon. This activity, for many an American poet, has presented the potential for a discovery of essential, previously unknown facts about his or her identity:

> In a little while I'll be drifting up an on-ramp
> sipping coffee from a styrofoam container,
> checking my gas gauge with one eye
> and twisting the dial of the radio
> with the fingers of my third hand,
> looking for a station I can steer to Saturn on.[14]

This is a moment whose familiarity to all Americans who regularly commute to work renders it almost a cliché. The realist images of the first stanza are disrupted by the surreal image of a "third hand" that flips the radio controls in search of a musical escape from the routine activity being performed. In the next stanza, Hoagland's allegiance to the American tradition of car driving, defined as a sickness that he enjoys, is affirmed:

> It seems I have the travelling disease
> again, an outbreak of that virus
> celebrated by the cracked lips
> of a thousand blues musicians—song
> about a rooster and a traintrack
> a sunrise and a jug of cherry cherry wine[15]

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14 Tony Hoagland, "Perpetual Motion," in *Sweet Ruin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 3.

15 Hoagland, "Perpetual Motion," 3.

The echoes of a blues lyric (the mention of the rooster, traintrack, and jug of wine) are reinforced by the poet's decision to escape his present existence and travel into the unknown, towards a presumed better opportunity. The next stanza dramatizes the impulse of the driver to turn all aspects of his personal history into an opaque archetype of being that shows in the "perceptual confusion / that makes your loved ones into strangers / that makes a highway look like a woman / with air conditioned arms."[16] The Whitmanian metaphor of the open road of the highway assumes the physical resemblance to a female object of the poet's desire: "With a / bottomless cup of coffee for a mouth / and jewelry shaped like pay phone booths / dripping from her ears."[17] The phone booth image situates the poem in the historic days before the domination of the cellphone. The impulse to drive away from one's present situation towards an imagined opportunity lurking just beyond the horizon is a practical twentieth-century realization of the American myth of self-reliance and freedom that gets ironized by Hoagland as ridiculous and futile. Having turned the radio on, the driver suggests that the songs about to be heard might

> almost have me convinced
> that I am doing something romantic,
> something to do with "freedom" and "becoming"
> instead of fright and flight into
> an anonymity so deep
>
> It has no bottom,
> only signs to tell you what direction
> you are falling in: CHEYENNE, SEATTLE,
> WICHITA, DETROIT—Do you hear me,
> do you feel me moving through?[18]

16 Hoagland, "Perpetual Motion," 3.
17 Hoagland, "Perpetual Motion," 3.
18 Hoagland, "Perpetual Motion," 3–4.

The confessional poet's resort to what Jonathan Holden called "the abuse of the second person pronoun" in the conventional use of "you" as an imagined reader-listener whose sympathy with the action being portrayed is explored here.[19] The list of interchangeable destinations, distant American cities whose appeal disappears the moment one visits them, is given in capital letters, which further emphasizes the futility of the driving quest—no matter where Hoagland might dream of escaping to, he cannot escape himself, and the charm of the poem lies in the fact that the speaker knows about this impossibility and yet proceeds with the impulse to drive anyway. His quest for self-discovery becomes a valid social gesture of a conscious member of a society that he does not really wish to leave:

> With my foot upon the gas,
> between the future and the past
> I am here—
> here where the desire to vanish
> is stronger than the desire to appear.[20]

The journey into the interior of the author's self is a traditional conceit in American literature, influenced by walk poems from Wordsworth to Ammons, only the action of walking has, since the beginning of the twentieth century, been replaced with the more contemporary mode of driving an automobile. In an analysis of the walk and drive poem tradition, Marianne Boruch wonders about the utility of the car drive for inducing revelatory experience: "Behind the wheel, don't we all get stranger and stranger to ourselves as the world swallows us?"[21] That is, the desire to break free from one's immediate social situation, which

19 Jonathan Holden, *The Rhetoric of the Contemporary Lyric* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 38–56.

20 Hoagland, "Perpetual Motion," 4.

21 Marianne Boruch, "Poets in Cars," *Massachusetts Review* 43, no. 4 (2002): 539.

is what Hoagland's "Perpetual Motion" dramatizes, only seems to lead to greater alienation and frustration of the introverted speaker. The strategy of driving away to escape one's own demons and to internalize a strange town along the way was best dramatized by Richard Hugo in "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg." Having reached a town that has seen better times, Hugo realizes there is still hope in pushing the gas pedal: "The car that brought you here still runs."[22] Wherever the solitary driver goes, it takes just a short-lived visit to realize that to return to one's original bearings is not such a bad idea. Hoagland's moment of epiphanic awareness brings a similar impulse: "With my foot upon the gas," the speaker realizes that he is alive, in the moment ("I am here"), however limited his car-enclosed vision may be. Edward Hirsch emphasizes the fact that this driving obsession has been shared by many, for, "indeed American poetry itself has been on the move."[23] The story of how the American character of the individual gets formed has been, thanks to the development of transportation in the twentieth century, "happening at road-stops and gas stations, … sleeping under bridges and walking on side streets in small towns and large cities, it has been pushing itself all night across the country and pulling off the highway in the early morning."[24] In "Perpetual Motion," Hoagland thus explores the general significance of the automobile as a central symbol of the American identity while the activity of driving itself is exposed as an essential everyday routine that has defined the ways in which American poets think about themselves and the world. Hirsch explains that the automobile "is such a central, constitutive feature of American life that it has become an emblem in our poetry, an odd, moving, sometimes comical and sometimes deadly serious

22 Richard Hugo, "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg," in *Making Certain It Goes On: The Collected Poems of Richard Hugo* (New York: Norton, 1984), 217.

23 Edward Hirsch, "Preface," in *Drive, They Said: Poems about Americans and Their Cars*, ed. Kurt Brown (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1994), xv.

24 Hirsch, preface to *Drive, They Said*, xv–xvi.

icon of our geographical space and allotted time."[25] The title of Hoagland's poem, "Perpetual Motion," also refers to the sense of movement that the usage of a vehicle offers. But driving a car, both in a poem and in real life, has advantages as well as drawbacks. Philip Slater points out that "automobiles confer great power and high expectations, and then frustrate them" as their drivers are prone to getting nervous and aggressive, trying to negotiate heavy traffic or their inner demons while driving to and from work.[26]

The speaker of "Perpetual Motion" tries to change his life and find an identity to be happy with in the process of erasing his old selves during a routine drive. The final realization of the failure of his identity quest ("the desire to vanish / is stronger than the desire to appear.") brings Hoagland back to his starting point. In "The Spirit of Place," D.H. Lawrence deconstructed the myth of early European immigration to America, which was originally interpreted as a quest for religious and economic freedom, arguing, instead, that the immigrants came "largely to get away … from themselves. Away from everything … they are and have been."[27] This impulse to escape one's unacceptable self and seek a better identity elsewhere has haunted even American descendants of the immigrants, as, according to Lawrence, the very search, the "getting down to the deepest self … takes some diving."[28] Travel in American literature has indeed been a traditional element of American identity. Yet Hoagland's poem shows that the self-deprecatory denial of one's identity is not enough to sustain the poem's didactic meaning. In "The City," a great poem about the futility of exile as a means to identify with a surrogate place, the Greek poet C.P. Cavafy explains: "You won't find a new country, won't

25 Hirsch, preface to *Drive, They Said*, xv.

26 Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 120.

27 D.H. Lawrence, "The Spirit of Place," in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1951), 13–14.

28 D.H. Lawrence, "The Spirit of Place," 17.

find another shore. / The city will always pursue you."[29] The charm of Hoagland's "motion" lies in the poet's knowledge of the futility of his rebellion. Having realized that there is no escape from one's current identity, the best thing to do is reaffirm it ("I am here—") with all the absurdity of such a brave claim.

The gas-powered cage of the automobile, famously called, by Robert Bly, "this solitude covered with iron,"[30] makes it possible for the American poet to become as isolated, or socialized, as located in a specific region or estranged from it, within the frame of the driving poem, as he or she allows him- or herself to become. In "Perpetual Motion," Hoagland joins the tradition of American car poetry that updated Whitman's concept of the Open Road to include the use of the automobile. From William Carlos Williams up to the present, American poets have used the car driving situation to explore their personal agenda, enjoying the car as a symbol of control over one's destiny, technological advance, power, and a unique space that is at once private and available to the public eye, always shifting in space and time. Like D.H. Lawrence, W.H. Auden also viewed American identity as shaped by the impulse to burn one's bridges, to set out on the road:

> In America … to move on and make a fresh start somewhere else is still the normal reaction to dissatisfaction or failure. Such social fluidity has important psychological effects. Since movement involves breaking social and personal ties, the habit creates an attitude towards personal relationships in which impermanence is taken for granted.[31]

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29 C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, ed. George Savidis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 28.

30 Robert Bly, "Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River," in *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (Hanover,: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), 20.

31 W.H. Auden, "American Poetry," in *The Dyer's Hand, and Other Essays* (London: Faber, 1987), 360.

The state of habitual restlessness lies at the core of American identity, which partly explains its appeal to outsiders from all over the world. Hoagland's poetry of the white middle-class male guilty of being too sensitive and politically incorrect ranks him among what Stephen Burt called the Elliptical poets, that is, "younger" American poets who "seek the authority of the rebellious; they want to challenge their readers, violate decorum, surprise or explode assumptions about what belongs in a poem or what matters in life, and to do so while meeting traditional lyric goals."[32]

Hoagland's world in *Sweet Ruin* is a godless place defined by American pop culture, and the failure of the poet rebel to establish solid relationships with his family, friends, and the world. Steven Cramer claims that the poet's

> muscular, conversational lines sprint from narrative passages to metaphorical clusters to speculative meditations, and then loop back, fast-talking and digressing their way into the book's richly American interior. Hoagland's poems grapple with selfhood and manhood, but they also consider the mysteries of national identity—how the social and the personal mutually impinge.[33]

In "Volunteer," an answer to the poet's identity crisis is sought in the healing powers of popular music: "Oh lord, / allow me to continue / to preach your gospel / of rock and roll / among the deaf and dear defeated / creatures of the heart."[34] Hoagland writes a dark poetry that is both funny and edgy, nervous to the point of breaking down both the poet's mental system and the border between farce and tragedy.

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32 Stephen Burt, "The Elliptical Poets," in *Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2009), 346.

33 See Steven Cramer, review of *Sweet Ruin*, by Tony Hoagland, *Ploughshares* 18, no. 4 (1992–93): 236.

34 Tony Hoagland, "Volunteer," in *Sweet Ruin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 41.

Michael Broek has pointed out a problem of tone that Hoagland has struggled with all his career. As a poet working in the confessional mode, he has dealt with the issue of "how to convey emotional seriousness at a time, since at least the 1990s, when the White, heterosexual, middle-class male is, on many grounds, immediately suspect, and perhaps justifiably so."[35] In an age when to sound serious (or funny) about anything puts the poet's credibility at risk, Hoagland's persona of an ironic self-deprecator is not easy to handle successfully, yet this approach of undercutting any serious theme that he explores seems the only viable mode for the poet. In "Poem for Men Only," Hoagland manages to portray the uneasy relationship between an American father and his adult son. Both men have been brought up to be hard, unemotional, self-reliant, and aggressive, yet the father's sudden and embarrassing lack of mobility ("When, / like a weighty oak, my father fell, / chopped down by a streak / of lightning through his chest")[36] makes it necessary for the two men to communicate their emotions, a field traditionally reserved for women: "I stared through the window, / across the institutional lawn, // seeking what to feel."[37] Seeing his father crippled by a stroke into a weakness that both men are ashamed of, the son gropes for words of consolation that cannot be found: "When I looked // for my father, when my father finally / looked for me, it was impossible. We kept / our dignity."[38] The American cult of masculine pride does not allow the two protagonists to become emotional and connect through admitting their weaknesses like women. The comedy of "Poem for Men Only" is in the way Hoagland manipulates the awkward hospital communication between the two protagonists, describing the

35 Michael Broek, "Weird & Bathetic: Tony Hoagland, *The Office*, and the Confessional Mode," *American Poetry Review* 41, no. 6 (2012): 11.

36 Tony Hoagland, "Poem for Men Only," in *Sweet Ruin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 5.

37 Hoagland, "Poem for Men Only," 6.

38 Hoagland, "Poem for Men Only," 6.

absurdity of the son's attempt to help his father, who, even in his condition, remains the old-school American male who acts tough and rejects any help so as not to appear weak. In another poem, "The Delay," Hoagland provides a strangely fitting comment on the father-son relationship: "But the story stays the same: some of us / would rather die than change. We love / what will destroy us // as a shortcut through this world / which would bend and break us slowly / into average flesh and blood."[39] For Hoagland, his identity as man, lover, friend, son, American, is shaped as much by a feeling of inadequacy and failure as by the echoes of American popular culture that have taken the position of sentimental education for the poet. In "You're the Top," Hoagland evokes a Proustian memory of his rich grandmother that is triggered by the poet's "driving north of Boston in a rented car / while Cole Porter warbles on the radio."[40] The poem is framed by a 1930s Cole Porter hit which is structured around a catalog of hyperbolic compliments that a man and a woman pay each other, likening themselves to the greatest artistic and cultural accomplishments of civilization, yet, in a breakdown of the highbrow/lowbrow dichotomy, incongruous concepts, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Napoleon brandy, are versified together in the song. Hoagland cruelly judges his grandmother's upper-class naiveté, claiming that he "hated how a life of privilege / had kept her ignorance intact / about the world beneath her pretty feet, / how she believed that people with good manners / naturally had yachts, knew how to waltz / and dribbled French into their sentences / like salad dressing."[41] The Porter song, however, becomes a sentimental meeting point for the snobbery-hating poet and his grandmother, "a tipsy debutante in 1938, kicking a party with her shoes … bright and

39 Tony Hoagland, "The Delay," in *Sweet Ruin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 13–14.

40 Tony Hoagland, "You're the Top," in *Sweet Ruin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 32.

41 Hoagland, "You're the Top," 32–33.

beautiful and useless."[42] The nasty tone of the poet's remembrance is redeemed by the parallel sense of the poet, a social failure whose class standing cannot match that of his privileged grandmother, who imagines himself in the impossibly ludicrous position of driving a car and giving a lift to his grandmother who really was, by virtue of age and social class, his superior who did not need to be accepted by her young grandson: "Of all the people that I've known / I think my grandmother Bernice / would be best qualified to be beside me now."[43] Peter Harris is an early critic who spotted the propensity of Hoagland to focus on relationships with family, friends, and enemies, in which there is a strong "presence of pain, particularly of ruptured relationships, [which] looms very much in the background."[44] This sense of a painful break from the poet's past enables him, strangely, to use a nasty attitude toward his targets, as in "You're the Top," without actually being mean. In another poem, Hoagland admits to being a failed satirist whose shortcomings and attacks on those he loves should be taken less than seriously: "I guess I'm just the kind of person // who needs to be continually reminded about love and brevity, about diligence / and loyalty to pain. And maybe my attention / is just permanently damaged, never coming back / from too much television."[45] In "History of Desire," Hoagland comments on growing up from adolescent rage and naiveté: "We keep coming back / to what we are—each time older, / more freaked out, or less afraid."[46] Hoagland's small biographies of ironic self-destruction imply that defeat is a natural prelude to grace and loss a kind of threshold leading to wisdom. The memory of adolescent love of 1960s rock music concerts is explored in "All Along the

42 Hoagland, "You're the Top," 33.

43 Hoagland, "You're the Top," 32.

44 Peter Harris, "Poetry Chronicle," 697.

45 Tony Hoagland, "In the Land of Lotus Eaters," in *Sweet Ruin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 45.

46 Tony Hoagland, "History of Desire," in *Sweet Ruin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 50.

Watchtower." In an allusion to the eponymous Jimi Hendrix song, the poem retrieves the charm of watching "a single, distant figure on a stage, gripping a guitar / that twisted like a serpent // trying to turn into a bird,"[47] while the protagonist joins the audience in "a ridiculous belief in good vibrations"—the adult poet admits that the attraction of music wears thin with the passage of years: "and we found out, again and again, / you couldn't hold a bolt of lightning / very long / you couldn't spend a lifetime / on the spire of a moment's exultation."[48]

In "Safeway," Hoagland portrays the adolescent mix of revulsion and annoyance at his mother's terminal illness, which she tries to defy by going shopping with her son: "I was angry, dutiful, and seventeen, afraid she was going to read her obituary / in the faces of the shoppers."[49] This cruel tone is not, however, sustained in the poem as Hoagland admits his reading of the mother's brave attempt at socializing changed: "the scene looks different to me now. I see / a little group of people, halted / in the midst of life, / their carts jammed up / against the lettuce and the tangerines."[50] In "Emigration," the theme of a grave illness is used to evoke an ominous atmosphere: "Try being sick for a year, / then having that year turn into two, / until the memory of your health is like an island / going out of sight."[51] Nothing is normal any more, perception of the world is warped until "the very sky seems pharmaceutical," and finally there is "only a desire to be done. / But you're not done. Your bags are packed / and you are travelling."[52] The

47 Tony Hoagland, "All Along the Watchtower," in *Sweet Ruin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 67.

48 Hoagland, "All Along the Watchtower," 67.

49 Tony Hoagland, "Safeway," in *Sweet Ruin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 74.

50 Hoagland, "Safeway," 74–75.

51 Tony Hoagland, "Emigration," in *Sweet Ruin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 69.

52 Hoagland, "Emigration," 70.

metaphor of terminal illness as travel into the unknown shows a darker side of Hoagland's otherwise comic sensibility.

In the *Sweet Ruin* poems, Hoagland attacks the clichés about pain, suffering, loss, and taboo subject matter using situational comedy, as well as the potential of language to render comic even the most serious of themes, emotions, and situations. "Are You Experienced?" is a central poem from Hoagland's second full-length volume, *Donkey Gospel* (1998). It is a good example of the contemporary poem that exploits the myths and clichés associated with first-hand experience of the rock and roll era of the 1960s. The poem's title plays with the double meaning of first alluding to the classic first album of the Jimi Hendrix Experience psychedelic rock band of the late 1960s, as well as addressing the reader with the playful challenge in the title, asking about prowess in the area of hallucinogen consumption.[53] The poem features a funny juxtaposition of Hendrix, who "played "Purple Haze" onstage, / scaling his guitar like a black cat / up a high-voltage, psychedelic fence,"[54] with the adolescent protagonist who finds himself having to leave the concert to look for his car, "because // I wanted to have something familiar / to throw up next to."[55] The acute sickness of the protagonist is contrasted with the sublime experience of the rest of the audience—while the Hendrix song goes on, the young poet struggles with the effect of "the pills I had swallowed / several hundred years before, / pills that had answered so many of my questions."[56] The sensory perceptions of the protagonist are now warped, as is his ability to comment on the dichotomy between mass entertainment by rock music stars like Hendrix and highbrow art: "they might as well have been guided tours / of miniature castles and museums, /

53 The Hendrix album title is really *Are You Experienced*, with no question mark. It was released in May 1967 and helped launch the short but meteoric international career of Jimi Hendrix (d. 1970).

54 Tony Hoagland, "Are You Experienced?," in *Donkey Gospel* (Saint Paul: Graywolf, 1998), 66.

55 Hoagland, "Are You Experienced?," 66.

56 Hoagland, "Are You Experienced?," 66.

microscopic Sistine Chapels // with room for everyone inside."[57] The Hendrix song, which is about a drug-induced hallucination, helps to emphasize the less-than-glorious drug experience of the protagonist, who wants to, but cannot, take part in the vision promised by the song. The sickness makes him leave the concert, which becomes a subject for self-mockery: "But now something was backfiring, / and I was out on the perimeter of history, // gagging at the volume of raw data, / unable to recall the kind and color / of the car I owned."[58] However pathetic the memory of drug-induced sickness, its connection to the first-hand experience of a live Hendrix show in the late 1960s, which in itself has become an invaluable cultural memory to everyone who was there, elevates the moment of embarrassing individual sickness to the shared communal experience of the Hendrix magic, which becomes, with the passage of time, invaluable as "one day this moment // cleaned up and polished / would itself become / a kind of credential."[59] A delayed moment of epiphany, recognized by the mature poet-speaker only after years have passed since its happening, the resolution of the poem is at once both moving and absurd, two contradictory emotions that Hoagland likes to evoke simultaneously. By negotiating between the disgusting and farcical, the result is a nostalgic joke that connects three different levels of culture—first, the psychedelic drug culture of the young Americans of the late 1960s, with its emphasis on the derangement of the senses, second, the budding rock star culture, represented by Hendrix and his wild stage antics and psychedelic songs, and third, the ludicrous attempt of the would-be highbrow poet to relate to the other two cultures and to justify the pathetic vomiting incident in the adjacent parking lot.

Hoagland is also a penetrative culture poet. In a recent poem, "America," he updates the Ginsberg type of social commentary poem to cater to the audience of the early 2000s and changes the elements

57 Hoagland, "Are You Experienced?," 66.
58 Hoagland, "Are You Experienced?," 66.
59 Hoagland, "Are You Experienced?," 66.

of commercial and popular culture to be included. The poem is constructed as a rhetorical answer of the professor to "one of the students with blue hair and a tongue stud," who claims that "America is for him a maximum-security prison / Whose walls are made of RadioShacks and Burger Kings, and MTV episodes."[60] As the professor speaker gets ready to angrily dismiss the student's ignorance about the real meaning of his cultural rebellion, he remembers a dream of his own in which complicity in the great American pastime, shopping at the mall, was likewise endorsed: "And then I remember that when I stabbed my father in the dream last night, / It was not blood, but money / That gushed out of him, bright green hundred-dollar bills / Spilling from his wounds."[61] Ultimately, the protagonist does not come up with anything to contradict the student's half-baked dismissal of American commercialism, since he, too, enjoys the hand of the market that maddens him, watching "rivers of bright merchandise run past you" and the only reaction of the poet is to follow "your own hand / which turns the volume higher?"[62] Beneath the angry rejection of the student's shallow understanding of the workings of American consumer culture, the poet himself gives in to the music of that culture, turning the volume higher to drown out any dissenting thoughts.

In another recent poem, "Argentina," Hoagland follows the poetics of outrageous stances taken to shock the reader into an awareness of what is funny about being a white, American, middle-class male. A central passage in the poem is really a digression from the poet's meditation on being treated by a chiropractor:

> How did I come to believe in a government called
> Tony Hoagland?
> with an economy based on flattery and self-protection?

60 Tony Hoagland, "America," in *What Narcissism Means to Me: Selected Poems* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2005), 17.

61 Hoagland, "America," 17.

62 Hoagland, "America," 18.

and a sewage system of selective forgetting?
and an extensive history of broken promises?[63]

This is a powerful take on Whitman's cosmic self and its larger-than-life optimism. Hoagland's persona is the joking loser, sensitive to failure and being rejected in life's challenges and intense moments. The treatment by the chiropractor frames the meditation with a final sense of futility as the action of "having paid a stranger to touch and straighten me" does not bring relief, yet there is some solace in the vision of the protagonist's car, which, "after the slight adjustment of a spring shower, / looks almost new again."[64] In "Lucky," a mirror theme to "Poem for Men Only" (which explores the father-son relationship), Hoagland explores ambivalence about helping his ailing mother and the effect of her terminal illness upon their relationship: "If you are lucky in this life, / you will get to help your enemy / the way I got to help my mother / when she was weakened past the point of saying no."[65] Hoagland dramatizes the social taboo of feeling animosity towards an ailing parent who needs to be helped "into the big enamel tub / half-filled with water / which I had made just right."[66] The protagonist's ambivalent attitude toward his frail mother is vintage Hoagland; unable to express love directly, he cloaks it with a layer of unacceptable hatred: "my mind filled up with praise / as lush as music, // amazed at the symmetry and luck / that would offer me the chance to pay / my heavy debt of punishment and love / with love and punishment."[67] The comic element in Hoagland's poetry comes precisely at moments of meditation on his feelings; the positive and negative motives are always worn on his sleeve, for the reader to take a choice, "because there is a bond between you / and sweet is sweet

63 Tony Hoagland, "Argentina," in *What Narcissism Means to Me: Selected Poems* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2005), 19.
64 Hoagland, "Argentina," 19.
65 Tony Hoagland, "Lucky," in *What Narcissism Means to Me: Selected Poems* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2005), 92.
66 Hoagland, "Lucky," 92.
67 Hoagland, "Lucky," 92.

in any language."[68] Besides being a practicing ironic self-deprecator who readily presents himself as a ridiculous failure of the middle-class American male archetype, Hoagland adds the element of shock by introducing many poems with bizarre, comic, or even surreal conflicts. Out of these conflicts, he navigates using meditation on himself, others, and American culture, in a tone of playful self-hatred that quickly turns upon its practitioner. In "Hate Hotel," a negative and destructive feeling is turned upon its head and presented as an uneasy virtue: "Sometimes I like to sit and soak / in the Jacuzzi of my hate, hatching my plots / like a general running his hands over a military map."[69] The celebration of hate becomes a twisted homage to love as Hoagland develops the meditation further: "—again and again I let hate / get pregnant and give birth / to hate, which gets pregnant / and gives birth again—"[70] When the energy of hate has been spent, it becomes a sleeping cat sleeping at his feet: "Curl up at my feet / and sleep. Little pussycat hate. Home sweet hate."[71] The comic potential of confessional poetry's taboo subject matter is further tested in "Suicide Song," a dark satire on the life choice of several prominent 1960s American poets.[72] Having run through a list of reasons to kill himself, Hoagland comes to an unsolvable problem when he wonders, "who has clothes nice enough to be caught dead in? // Not me. You stay alive you stupid asshole / Because you haven't been excused, // You haven't finished though it takes a mulish stubbornness / To chew this food."[73] The strategy of making the protagonist in his poems take shocking, outrageous, socially unacceptable stances makes

68 Hoagland, "Lucky," 93.

69 Tony Hoagland, "Hate Hotel," in *What Narcissism Means to Me: Selected Poems* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2005), 52.

70 Hoagland, "Hate Hotel," 52.

71 Hoagland, "Hate Hotel," 52.

72 This remark refers to John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton, all of whom committed suicide after having explored various shades of madness and suicidal tendencies in their poetry.

73 Tony Hoagland, "Suicide Song," in *What Narcissism Means to Me: Selected Poems* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2005), 53.

Hoagland's humor balance between crass vulgarity and slapstick wackiness. In "Fortune," a meditation on a fortune cookie received by a patron in a Chinese restaurant provides a fitting closure to this review of Hoagland's poetics of controlled, narcissistic craziness:

> Maybe you will marry a red-haired woman.
> Maybe you are going to take a long journey.
> Maybe a red-haired woman will steal your car and take a long journey.
> Maybe you will be buried next to your mother.[74]

When the poet's sensibility is cynical at heart and faithless, his humor may appear unacceptable in its darkness, yet it rewards those who are willing to buy its ambivalent emotional commitments:

> but you don't tell them the truth
> because you don't trust anyone
> and you never have:
> that is your fortune.[75]

Although critics such as Joel Brouwer have complained that Hoagland's poetry reflects American culture in the sense that "banality, greed, profligacy and perverse sense of entitlement"[76] do, his best poems are, at the same time, "fully alive to the rich, dark depths of their grumpiness."[77] In "Big Grab," Hoagland juxtaposes the marketing strategy of the gradual downsizing of a bag of chips (The Big Grab) to what happens to language in contemporary American culture:

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74 Tony Hoagland, "Fortune," in *What Narcissism Means to Me: Selected Poems* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2005), 55.

75 Hoagland, "Fortune," 55.

76 Joel Brouwer, "Truth or Dare," *New York Times*, February 4, 2010.

77 Brouwer, "Truth or Dare."

> Nothing means what it says,
> and it says it all the time.
> Out on Route 28, the lights blaze all night
> On a billboard of a beautiful girl
> Covered with melted cheese—
>
> See how she beckons to the river of late-night cars!
> See how tipsy drivers swerve,
> Under the breathalyzer moon![78]

As a contemporary bard of America as a shopping heaven for consumers who are happy (or ignorant enough) to buy its manipulative language, Hoagland seems to have no equal. His satire on the vices of the contemporary American worship of heedless materialism seems relevant precisely because he, too, is unabashedly a victim of his obsessions with the lowbrow, cheap, corny, and pathetic elements of the commercial culture. This insider attitude allows Hoagland to take outrageously funny stances in order to bite the hand that feeds his sardonic imagination. "This is the loneliest job in the world: / to be an accountant of the heart."[79] Hoagland's loneliness of heart is a fitting metaphor for the feeling of cultural ambivalence about the poet's emotional position in contemporary America. Hoagland's highbrow snobbery is constantly checked with a deep-felt knowledge of being ridiculous, as he repeatedly admits to being just a pretender to high art connoisseurship who loves his TV shows, hamburgers, and sexy billboards just as much, a position that Hoagland the culture critic and lover has profitably explored all his career.

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78 Tony Hoagland, "Big Grab," in *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2010), 5.

79 Tony Hoagland, "The Loneliest Job in the World," in *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2010), 38.

Billy Collins: The Genteel Commentator

Recent American poetry has largely avoided comedy and humor. Tony Hoagland sums up the mainstream American poem as humorless writing in which "irony and conceptual whimsy, various styles of verbal wit, and 44 flavors of self-consciousness prevail."[1] Ronald Wallace explains that the predominant lack of "serious" comic poetry in American literary culture may be caused by the stereotypical association of humor with light verse whereas "serious poetry has been equated with solemnity, humorlessness, and intellectual difficulty."[2] Still, there is perhaps no better candidate for the title of the quintessential contemporary American comic poet than Billy Collins. A former American Poet Laureate (in 2001–3), Collins is a popular writer of middle-class American suburbia who sells well, an unusual marketing position for a poet today.[3] His poetry mixes humor, irony, and realism in deceptively simple, likeable lyrics that weave together elements of American culture, especially literature, music, art, philosophy, and autobiography. William Logan has called Collins "that rarity among American poets, one with popular appeal, easy to read as a billboard, genial as a Sunday golfer, and not so awful you want to cut your throat after reading him."[4] Adam Kirsch similarly

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1 Tony Hoagland, "Cast Swine before Pearls: Comedy, Shamanic Rage, and Poetry," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 22, no. 3 (2009): 374.

2 Ronald Wallace, *God Be with the Clown: Humor in American Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 4.

3 For more information on the tenure by Collins in this prestigious and honorary position, see Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress, "Past Poets Laureate: 2001–2010," Library of Congress, accessed November 14, 2013, http://www.loc.gov/poetry/laureate-2001-2010.html. For an account of the exceptional success of Collins in terms of the sales of his poetry books, see for example Adam Kirsch, "Over Easy," *New Republic*, October 29, 2001.

4 William Logan, "Out on the Lawn," *New Criterion* 22, no. 4 (2003): 85.

praises Collins for being "funny, in an accessible and immediately familiar way."[5]

This chapter surveys a selection of representative poems by Billy Collins in order to define his mode of the comic poem about American culture.[6] While the tonal range of the postwar American poetry situated in the suburbs has been diverse, featuring important poetry by Richard Wilbur, Louis Simpson, Carolyn Kizer, and Adrienne Rich, not much attention has been paid to the element of humor in their poems.[7] Fiction by major postwar authors such as John Updike, Richard Yates, Philip Roth, and John Cheever examines American middle-class suburbia as a place where repression, disillusionment, violence, madness, and absurdity reign supreme, yet it is my intention to show how Collins as a representative American poet of recent and contemporary prominence has used a comic approach to the suburban experience. The traditional approach of American poets, however, is to portray the suburb as a dead, conformist, stifling place that is inimical to the creative existence of any serious artist.[8]

"Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House" is an early Collins poem about the joys and woes of life in a suburban house. The dramatic potential of the title raises questions about the nature of the situation that the speaker-protagonist of the poem faces. The introductory lines of the poem quickly deflate

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5 Kirsch, "Over Easy," 38.

6 An earlier version of this chapter was first published in modified form, in *From Theory to Practice 2013: Zlín Proceedings in Humanities* (Zlín: Univerzita Tomáše Bati, 2014).

7 See Wallace, *God Be with the Clown*, 4.

8 For an early yet still relevant treatment of the suburb as a locus of postwar American poetry, see the final chapter in Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945–1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 228–44. For a survey of postwar poetry that criticizes the conformity and consumerist nature of life in the middle-class American suburb, see also Jiří Flajšar, "Poetry of the American Suburbs—A Postwar Exercise in Non-conformity," in: *Conformity and Resistance in America*, ed. Jacek Gutorow and Tomasz Lebiecki (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007), 88–94.

the expectation of a violent showdown as one learns what the real problem is: "The neighbors' dog will not stop barking. / He is barking the same high, rhythmic bark / that he barks every time they leave the house."[9] The comic element here lies in the mock-serious dramatization of a banal situation that has plagued many a suburban middle-class professional who happens to spend a day at home while his nine-to-five neighbors have left their pets unattended. The situation develops into a conflict between the poet and animal as Collins tries to fight the barking with loud classical music: "I close all the windows in the house / and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast."[10] The humor is caused by the incongruity of the auditory battle—the down-to-earth, physical performance of the barking dog is challenged by the cultured playback of a classical music recording, so the highbrow and lowbrow elements of the suburban identity fight it out in a quest for sonic hegemony. The rest of the poem is a ludicrous metamorphosis of the figure of the barking dog, as the outside nuisance heard by the poet, into an imagined orchestra musician who becomes part of the music played on the poet's stereo, "as if Beethoven / had included a part for barking dog."[11] The rest of the poem chronicles the futile attempt by the poet to drown out the sound of the barking while the dog, by now elevated to the status of a member of the orchestra, sits in the orchestra even after the music has died out, set on "the famous barking solo, / that endless coda."[12]

A problem with a neighbor's dog, a trivial matter whose significance is blown out of proportion for the suburbanite, has long been a staple theme for American poets. In "Suburban," a 1970s take on a similar subject of neighborly skirmishing, John Ciardi

9 Billy Collins, "Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House," in *Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Random House, 2001), 3.

10 Collins, "Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House," 3.

11 Collins, "Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House," 3.

12 Collins, "Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House," 3.

explores the comic potential of a call from Mrs. Friar, a well-bred neighbor who, embarrassed yet adamant, phones the poet and asks him to remove "a large repulsive object in my petunias," excrement which she assumes was produced by the poet's dog.[13] While the poet knows that the dog in question was away with his son during the time of the presumed action, he removes the object from Mrs. Friar's flowerbed to save her dignity as well as his own. As the final act of the suburban mock-drama, Ciardi deposits the smelly object in his own flowerbed, waxing ironic about the social dictum to keep good relationships with one's neighbors "till the glorious resurrection // when even these suburbs shall give up their dead."[14]

In "Osso Bucco," Collins portrays the quiet domestic evening atmosphere that follows a feast, an Italian dish made by his wife. The suburb is hailed as a haven of peace where the evils and tragedies of the world are blocked out as the poet reclines, "tilted back on his chair, a creature with a full stomach— / something you don't hear much about in poetry."[15] The mockery is directed at the stereotype of the poet as a tortured soul whose suffering should be a primary inspiration for his writing, "that sanctuary of hunger and deprivation."[16] In the rest of the poem, Collins develops a parallel story as he traces the further development of a suburban evening that he spends with his wife with whom he will later "slip below the surface of the night … into the marrow of the only place we know"[17] while somewhere else, the tortured figure of the poet is involved in the Sisyphean task of "crawling up a rocky hillside / on bleeding knees and palms."[18] The juxtaposition of

13 John Ciardi, "Suburban," in *For Instance* (New York: Norton, 1979), 33.

14 Ciardi, "Suburban," 33.

15 Billy Collins, "Osso Bucco," in *Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Random House, 2001), 49.

16 Collins, "Osso Bucco," 49.

17 Collins, "Osso Bucco," 50.

18 Collins, "Osso Bucco," 50. Of course, a classic poem about the task of the poet is "Yet Do I Marvel" by Countee Cullen. The theme of Cullen's poem, however,

desire fulfilled (first, good meal, then good sex) in the case of the suburban husband is juxtaposed with the eternal frustration of the other poet who is sentenced to "carrying the stone of the world in his stomach."[19] The appeal of "Osso Bucco" is, as Kirch explains, in the ironic reversal of values as Collins celebrates "being lazy, tired, and well-fed" in an effort to mock the suffering, anti-bourgeois, pretension of the modern poet whose vain attempt to sustain the attention of the audience is likened to the eternal punishment of Sisyphus.[20]

In an effort to come to terms with what Kirsch calls "a guilty impatience with the demands of [literary] culture,"[21] Collins has become a master of the funny allusive poem designed for college-educated audiences who appreciate the literary references in poetry as long as these are served in an accessible manner. In "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," Collins assumes the comic role of the contemporary seducer of the famous nineteenth century female poet. The seduction is both physical and literary, for, having first undressed the passive female body of Dickinson, Collins works "like a polar explorer / through clips, clasps, and moorings, / catches, straps, and whalebone stays,"[22] then he proceeds to deconstruct some of Dickinson's best-known poems. Although the poet in this poem is portrayed as a domineering masculine figure who manipulates the woman in a traditional male chauvinist way, Collins salvages the account of Dickinson's seduction by holding back the intimate details, workshopping

differs from its use by Collins as Cullen focuses on the difficulty of the African American poet in the 1920s of being recognized on literary merit alone: "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!" Countee Cullen, "Yet Do I Marvel," *Poetry Foundation*, accessed November 14, 2013, http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171320.

19 Collins, "Osso Bucco," 50.

20 Kirsch, "Over Easy," 40.

21 Kirsch, "Over Easy," 40.

22 Billy Collins, "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," in *Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Random House, 2001), 119.

his experience as an exercise in descriptive restraint: "Later, I wrote in a notebook / it was like riding a swan into the night, / but, of course, I cannot tell you everything—."[23] After the playful use of a Dickinsonian dash to evoke the poet's own ambivalence about his role, Collins finishes the poem with parodic rewriting of Dickinson's best-known lines. As Dickinson remains a passive object of the male poet's desire, as one who lets herself be undressed and does not speak or move, her only reaction is a mysterious sigh which resembles "the way some readers sigh when they realize / that Hope has feathers, / that Reason is a plank, / that Life is a loaded gun / that looks right at you with a yellow eye."[24] The success of the poem lies in the reader's ability to enjoy Collins' deconstruction of Dickinson's poems and her cultural status as a private, convention-bound poet of passionate imagination. Collins communicates what Hoagland calls "the exhilarating pleasure of being smart in concert *with* the speaker."[25] So, arguably, Collins lets the reader/listener in on his ride through his comic world of allusions to high culture, avoiding off-putting smugness and opacity on the one hand, and refraining from the banality of everyday language and content on the other.

Another suburban poem which puts a historical figure in a contemporary suburban setting is "Shoveling Snow with Buddha." Collins imagines a meeting with the famous sage and spiritual teacher, putting him in the position of an average American suburban husband in winter: "But here we are, working our way

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23 Collins, "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," 120.

24 Collins, "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," 120. The original Dickinson poems echoed and parodied in the Collins poem are "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" (no. 591), "'Hope' is the thing with feathers" (no. 314), "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (no. 340), and "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun" (no. 764). See Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999).

25 Tony Hoagland, *Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft* (Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2006), 67.

down the driveway, / one shoveful at a time."[26] The shared physical activity gives rise to a ludicrous moment of enlightenment: "Aaah, says the Buddha, lifting his eyes / and leaning for a moment on his shovel / before he drives the thin blade again / deep into the glittering white snow."[27] In the world according to Collins, historical figures like the Buddha function to wake the poet from his suburban routine in a genteel standup comedy portrait of middle-class American life. By making fun of himself and of sacred figures from history such as Dickinson and the Buddha, such comic poetry manages to provide "a weapon against chaos and despair in a world that seems increasingly indifferent and absurd."[28]

In his suburban poems, Collins navigates the difficult terrain between authorial intelligence and forced simplicity of expression. As America's best-known poet of the 1990s and 2000s, Collins "provides welcome comic relief from a poetic culture that takes itself too seriously."[29] In "Envoy," he imagines sending a new book of poems out into the world as identical to the way a child is sent to adulthood by his or her parents, receiving a few good-bye bits of parental advice: "stay out as late as you like, / don't bother to call or write, / and talk to as many strangers as you can."[30] This comic advice to the poet's child, represented here by a book of poems, playfully goes agains the usual advice given to human children, giving Collins an edge over his hard-trying literary peers for whom reputation and fame means more than solid following from a popular and specialist audience. By maintaining a realistic vision of his world and its comic potential, he manages to write the poetry of an educated jester who avoids radical public gestures, offends no one, yet is able to entertain his audience with

26 Billy Collins, "Shoveling Snow with Buddha," in *Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Random House, 2001), 103.

27 Collins, "Shoveling Snow with Buddha." 104.

28 Wallace, *God Be with the Clown*, 5.

29 Christina Pugh, "Humor Anxiety," *Poetry* 189, no. 3 (2006): 228.

30 Billy Collins, "Envoy," in *Aimless Love: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Random House, 2013), n.p.

easy, but rarely disappointing comic excursions into the heart of American individualism, into a culture that has been defined by traditional art and literature as much as by TV, the Internet, and popular entertainment. In the last couple of decades, the dynamism of America has come to be equated with the charms and pitfalls of middle-class suburbia, of which Collins seems a fitting poetic representative.

Culture, Identity, and Humor in Contemporary Chinese-American Poetry

This chapter examines the diverse poetic approaches to defining the ethnic identity as represented in the work of three established contemporary Chinese American poets—Cathy Song (b. 1955), Marilyn Chin (b. 1955), and Li-Young Lee (b. 1957). In "Heaven," Song explains the impulse of the immigrant American poet to mythologize a Chinese heritage that is only known second-hand. In "I Ask My Mother to Sing," Lee admits to similar nostalgia for the old country which he, an assimilated American poet and citizen, only knows through the stories and songs of ancestors. Besides the forced identification with the culture of the old country, Chinese American poets also tend to sprinkle the quest for identity with satire. In "How I Got That Name," Chin mocks the sociological stereotype of Asian Americans as hard workers and over-achievers who lack creativity and imagination. Having arrived at a typology of the Chinese American identity in the poetry of Song, Lee, and Chin, the chapter finally defines recent Asian American poetry as the lyric exploration of the relationship between allegiance to ethnic heritage and forced assimilation of the poet as a person who, no matter how far she wants to distance herself from her roots, cannot avoid being defined by the ethnic history and patriarchal structure of the Asian American family.

The question of individual identity of the Asian immigrant to America has long been a central theme in Chinese American writing. Ever since Asian American poetry became recognized by publishing and critical circles in the 1980s as a branch of the rapidly developing market for American multicultural literature, Chinese American poets have established their mainstream reputations by focusing on the exploration of voice, ethnicity, heritage, class, and gender. Writers address, in different ways, the construction of identity as based on both Chinese and American cultural

traditions and on exclusion/inclusion narratives of being Chinese and/or American. The younger American poets have been able to benefit from the boom in multicultural literature (including Native American, Hispanic, and other literary voices that had not been heard/read before) that has been happening in the United States since the 1960s. In the case of Chinese American literature, the increase in critical and readers' attention to the work of the younger Asian American writers on the part of mainstream audiences had happened by the mid-1970s with major publications by Chinese American authors such as *The Woman Warrior* (1976) by Maxine Hong Kingston. What used to be unknown literature outside the Chinese American culture became an essential part of the center as, by the 1980s, "marginality is no longer a negative marker to mainstream literary tastes."[1]

Steven G. Yao identifies three traditional approaches of the Chinese American poets towards defining their identity as citizens and writers as being: 1) racial protest, 2) lyric testimony, and 3) ethnic abstraction.[2] The racial protest as an approach to portraying the Chinese American experience in poetry "developed as a response initially to the harsh reality and then to the haunting legacy of formal racial exclusion."[3] A classic example of this mode are the Angel Island Immigration Station poems written by Chinese immigrants on the walls of the detention building between 1910 and 1940. Second, the poetry of lyric testimony is a more recent "appeal to a decidedly traditional Romanticist individualism" of the poet as seer whose writing foregrounds elements such as authenticity of voice and personal tone.[4] This mode is exemplified by a poetic manifesto of Maxine Hong Kingston who recently

1 Jeffrey F.L. Partridge, "The Politics of Ethnic Authorship: Li-Young Lee, Emerson, and Whitman at the Banquet Table," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 37, no. 1 (2004): 104.

2 See Steven G. Yao, *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 265.

3 Yao, *Foreign Accents*, 12.

4 Yao, *Foreign Accents*, 13.

claimed a radical break from her distinguished prose career and a turn towards poetry. In her poetic memoir, *To Be the Poet*, she emphasizes "the untainted authenticity of personal experience as both the source of poetry and the ultimate guarantor of its value."[5] The most recent and innovative mode in Chinese American poetry, ethnic abstraction, has been practiced by poets like John Yau who "reject the notion of individual subjectivity giving voice to personal experience as the conceptual ground for poetic expression."[6] "I do not believe in the lyric I," claims Yau, yet he also admits to the rejection of "the postmodern belief that there is no self writing."[7] The way to negotiate these contradictory impulses towards a usable expression of Chinese American identity is, for writers like Yau, to cultivate a range of experimental, "nonrepresentational strategies, thereby expanding both the formal and thematic reach of Asian American poetry, oftentimes in order to interrogate the very condition of ethnicity itself."[8]

Especially the third approach, ethnic abstraction of the self into an identity that transcends the limitations of Asian heritage and Romantic individualism, seems to update the traditional, ethnocentric misreading of Chinese American writers who are typically "regarded as direct transplants from Asia or as custodians of an esoteric subculture."[9] In "Heaven," Cathy Song appropriates the second and third modes of Yao's typology of Chinese American poetry as she examines the question of Chinese American identity through a conversation with her America-born son who "thinks when we die we'll go to China."[10] The location of heaven is likened

5 Quoted in Yao, *Foreign Accents*, 14.

6 Yao, *Foreign Accents*, 15.

7 John Yau, "Between the Forest and Its Trees: *Where We Are Is in a Sentence*. Jack Spicer," *Amerasia Journal* 20, no. 3 (1994): 40.

8 Yao, *Foreign Accents,* 15.

9 Cynthia Sau-ling Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 9.

10 Cathy Song, "Heaven," in *Frameless Windows, Squares of Light* (New York: Norton, 1988). http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172142. All subsequent quotes of

to the old country of China "where, except for his blond hair, / the part that belongs to his father, / everyone will look like him." As a child of interracial marriage, the poet's son finds himself in an uneasy position of somebody who looks and feels neither Caucasian nor Asian American. In the second stanza, Song admits to having to invent her nostalgia for the old country for the purpose of the poem: "I've never seen it. / It's as if I can't sing that far." The poet speaks from the vantage point of an assimilated Chinese American whose link to China is at most a figment of forced imagination rather than a living connection that would shape her identity as a woman, mother, poet, and American. The family residence in high-altitude Colorado, "on the pancake plains / just east of the Rockies," is presented as completely removed and different from the Chinese sea-level altitude and the staple Chinese plants: "A mile above the sea, the air is so thin, / you can starve on it. / No bamboo trees / but the alpine equivalent, / reedy aspen with light, fluttering leaves." But Song retains her doubts about the viability of becoming a fully Americanized citizen of Colorado: "I've sat in this spot / and wondered why here? / Why in this short life, / this town, this creek they call a river?"

The fourth stanza of "Heaven" introduces the stereotypical figure of a male Chinese immigrant ancestor to America who "helped to build / the railroads for a dollar a day." The homesickness felt by the forefather is balanced with the awareness of the Chinese American poet of the 1980s that there is no way back home, "that each mile of track led him further away" from the ancestral home, culture, and lifestyle. But the nostalgia for old China is crucial even to Song's quiet meditation on the Chinese American heaven: "It must be in the blood, / this notion of returning." The archetype of the Chinese laborer, a perennial traveler whose restlessness is a way of refusing to Americanize and to leave the Chinese language and culture behind, is appropriated by Song

the poem are from this source.

who, having married a Caucasian American and produced American offspring, has to force herself into nostalgia for the old country and its heritage: "On a spring sweater day / it's as if we remember him." A closing image of the poem, evoking the stereotypical image of Chinese Americans as laundry people, weaves the landscapes and dreams of the old and new countries together through the Colorado-based son of the poet in an act of imaginary travel:

> If you look really hard
> says my son the dreamer,
> leaning out from the laundry's rigging,
> the work shirts fluttering like sails,
> you can see all the way to heaven.

Song's poem is thus a typical example of "liberal multiculturalism and its individualist poetics of ethnic identity,"[11] a mode which allows the poet to criticize a history of racial discrimination while singing praise, through the vehicle of the son's childish fantasies, about the double identity (of European and Asian American) of her interracial family.

In "I Ask My Mother to Sing," Li-Young Lee addresses a similar problem of how to claim the identity of Chinese American when one is hopelessly caught feeling neither Chinese nor American when it comes to calling a single narrative of culture and identity to be his own. The activity of singing traditional Chinese songs, which the mother and grandmother do in this poem, becomes a form of imaginary homecoming that is achieved not only by the women of the poet's family, but also by their offspring (such as the speaker-poet): "She begins, and my grandmother joins her. / Mother and daughter sing like young girls. / If my father were

11 Yao, *Foreign Accents*, 106.

alive, he would play / His accordion and sway like a boat."[12] The marked absence of the father, who is typified in Chinese American literature as a domineering presence that prevents the women from speaking up, allows the women and children in Lee's poem to break the traditional female silence and have their vocal moment of nostalgic joy and freedom. In the second stanza, Lee admits, as does Song in "Heaven," to knowing the old country only second-hand, from family storytelling: "I've never been in Peking, or the Summer Palace, / nor stood on the great Stone Boat to watch / the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake, the picnickers / running away in the grass." Even the use of the Romanized spelling of Beijing (i.e., Peking) as well as the Americanized names for the famous landmarks of the Chinese capital imply Lee's attitude towards China is that of an American outsider. He enjoys wearing the nostalgic cap, yet is proud, at the same time, to distance himself from the pathos of his mother and grandmother as regards the relationship to the old country. The third section brings a lovely natural image of waterlilies on a Chinese lake which "fill with rain until / they overturn, spilling water into water, / then rock back, and fill with more." The sentiment overcomes the singers by the end: "Both women have begun to cry. / But neither stops her song." While Lee, the Americanized outsider to the dispossession trauma of his Chinese parents and grandparents, speaks of his American dislocation while not desiring to return to the ancestral homeland, Cathy Song is more of a nostalgic dreamer who sympathizes with the stereotyped family ancestor who came to America, a pioneer immigrant "boy in Guangzhou," a mythic railroad worker who "never planned to stay" in America, yet died in the new country, "having seen Gold Mountain, / the icy wind tunneling through it, / these landlocked, makeshift ghost towns."

12 Li-Young Lee, "I Ask My Mother to Sing," in *Rose: Poems* (Rochester: BOA, 1986). http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/246596. All subsequent quotations of the poem are from this source.

If "Heaven" and "I Ask My Mother to Sing" are poems in which lyric testimony of the poet serves to distance the assimilated Chinese American poet from suffocating ties with the old country, "The Cleaving," a central poem from Lee's second book, *The City in Which I Love You* (1990), is a prime example of the three modes of Chinese American verse according to Yao at work. First, it is a poem of subtle racial protest. Second, it wields the lyric testimony about the ethnic American experience that one finds in Lee's work in general. Third, the poet achieves ethnic abstraction of the self to the point of being able to identify, like Whitman, with many different people in a radically different form of poem. "The Cleaving" starts as the autobiographical speaker goes to buy a duck in the Hon Kee Grocery in Chinatown. As he observes the Chinese butcher who "gossips like my grandmother, this man / with my face",[13] the butcher figure becomes abstracted to the point of Lee being able to project many different selves onto him, assuming the Whitmanian mask of the cosmic self that makes it possible to appropriate other selves even beyond one's ethnic background:

> He is
> My sister, this
> Beautiful Bedouin, this Shulamite,
> Keeper of Sabbaths, diviner
> Of holy texts, this dark
> Dancer, this Jew, this Asian, this one
> With the Cambodian face, Vietnamese face, this Chinese
> I daily face,
> This immigrant,
> This man with my own face.[14]

[13] Li-Young Lee, "The Cleaving," in *The City in Which I Love You* (Rochester: BOA, 1990), 77.

[14] Lee, "The Cleaving," 86–87.

A crucial verb in the poem is "to cleave." Its meaning is both "to chop up," using a cleaver, which is what the butcher does with the duck, and to "stick to" a literary/culture tradition, heritage, which is the imaginary action explored by the poet who feels ambivalent about his Chinese and American selves and yet is unable to live without either: "What then may I do / but cleave to what cleaves me."[15] In "The Cleaving," moreover, "eating becomes both a sign of cultural communion with other Chinese immigrants (i.e., the larger cultural community) as well as an aggressive weapon against racism in American society and American literature."[16] The poet not only wants to eat the duck he has bought, but also to take revenge on the American literary tradition exemplified by Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose racist remark about the Chinese makes Lee want to "eat Emerson, his transparent soul, his / soporific transcendence."[17] In the imaginary revenge upon Emerson the racist, Lee "is simultaneously the diner and the dinner."[18] As an Asian American poet, Lee feels defined by classical Chinese poets as much as by Western literary models and the Bible. For that reason, the metaphoric eating of his literary enemies, such as Emerson, is a form of reconciliation that makes the formation of his poetic identity possible. Wong explains that the eating as metaphor for coming to terms with one's identity and heritage is far from unique since "Asian American literature offers representations of food and eating that exemplify free choice, wholeness, communality, dignity."[19]

The last poem reviewed in this chapter is "How I Got That Name" by Marilyn Chin. The poem is a scathing autobiographical satire that mocks the numerous clichés associated with the definitions of Chinese American identity. In the first section of the

15 Lee, "The Cleaving," 86.
16 Partridge, "The Politics of Ethnic Authorship," 107–8.
17 Lee, "The Cleaving," 83.
18 Partridge, "The Politics of Ethnic Authorship," 107.
19 Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature*, 71.

poem, Chin proudly breaks the silence of the Chinese American woman and introduces herself with self-confidence that is marked in Asian American writing: "I am Marilyn Mei Ling Chin."[20] Then she explains the irony of her father naming his first-born daughter, a gender disappointment, "after some tragic white woman / swollen with gin and Nembutal." The fact of being named after Marilyn Monroe, the 1950s sex symbol of white America, becomes all the more apparent as the poet's own "mother couldn't pronounce the 'r'. / She dubbed me 'Numba one female offshoot.'" Chin's father, a successful businessman, is mocked as someone "who bought a chain of chopsuey joints / in Piss River, Oregon, / with bootlegged Gucci cash." Having satirized her family lineage and misnaming, Chin embarks on sociological commentary on the stereotypical qualities attributed to Chinese Americans:

> Oh, how trustworthy our daughters,
> how thrifty our sons!
> How we've managed to fool the experts
> in education, statistic and demography—
> We're not very creative but not adverse to rote-learning.
> Indeed, they can use us.
> But the "Model Minority" is a tease.

The Chinese identity, pride in one's heritage and a refusal to assimilate into American mainstream culture, thereby losing one's uniqueness, is juxtaposed with Chin's refusal to wax romantic about the social expectations of having to become a model Chinese American. By refusing to stay in the position of an obedient Chinese American daughter who respects the male-dominated dictum of her ethnic community, Chin assumes the role of a feminist model who sees

[20] Marilyn Chin, "How I Got That Name," in *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty* (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 1994). http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15631. All subsequent quotes of this poem are from this source.

defiance toward the Chinese patriarchal order as a way to find her own identity as woman, wife, mother, poet, and American. On another level, her dissatisfaction with having been named after Monroe only serves to intensify her quest for self-definition. Still, her protest does not come without acknowledging the impact of Chinese culture and stereotypes which may be mocked but never really discarded: "Oh, bamboo shoots, bamboo shoots! / The further west we go, we'll hit east; / the deeper down we dig, we'll find China." Chin the poet feels defined as much by her Chinese heritage as by her immersion in American literary models that include such patriarchal (and patronizing) figures as John Berryman: "Oh God, where have we gone wrong? / We have no inner resources!"[21] In the third section of "How I Got That Name," the Chin's father is portrayed as a tyrannical, street-vending God who "peered down from his kiosk in heaven / and saw that his descendants were ugly." The poet concludes her diatribe with a self-adressed mock epitaph, a final take on the marginality and pointlessness of her life and career:

> So here lies Marilyn Mei Ling Chin,
> married once, twice to so-and-so, a Lee and a Wong,
> granddaughter of Jack "the patriarch"
> and the brooding Suilin Fong,
> daughter of the virtuous Yuet Kuen Wong
> and G. G. Chin the infamous,
> sister of a dozen, cousin of a million,
> survived by everybody and forgotten by all.

By satirizing the value attributed to her ethnic origin, Chin actually celebrates its very value as the satire calls attention to the importance of harboring strong views, however ambivalent, about one's family,

[21] The allusion is to a passage from Berryman's "Dream Song no. 14," which reads: "and moreover my mother told me as a boy / (repeatingly) 'Ever to confess you're bored / means you have no // Inner Resources.'" See John Berryman, *The Dream Songs*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 16.

ethnicity, and roots. In protesting against the stereotyping of Chinese American women as obedient, hard-working, marginalized voices, Chin actually wields a "heroic voice challenging the status quo" of reading Asian American literature.[22] By protesting the racial inappropriateness of being named after Monroe, she is able to come up with a new identity as a Chinese American woman poet of the 1990s, someone who is "neither black nor white, / neither cherished nor vanquished, / just another squatter in her own bamboo grove / minding her poetry."

To conclude, identity of the writer and his or her position within family, society, culture and literary tradition loom large in the poetry of all three Chinese American poets surveyed here. For Song, her interracial marriage, a rising demographic phenomenon in the recent decades in the United States, gives rise to feelings of ambivalence about identification with the place and status of her own offspring. For Lee, the way to define his poetic self is to first incorporate and second to transcend the identities of a lowly Chinese butcher and highbrow critic of American literary ancestors, such as Emerson and Whitman, to find his own face that is cosmic, androgynous, and multicultural. For Chin, her identity becomes the result of a painful process of coming to terms with being a woman, immigrant, Chinese American (therefore marginalized in America), mother, defiant daughter (who rejects the oppression customs of the male-dominated Chinese culture), feminist writer who may well mock her bamboo-shoots adherence to China, yet is unable to abandon these limitations in order to become an assimilated American. Like the speaker in "How I Got That Name," Chin feels both enriched and robbed of her claim to be herself, "solid as wood, happily / a little gnawed, tattered, mesmerized / by all that was lavished upon her / and all that was taken away!" Chin's ultimate gesture is thus a grudging recognition of the customs and patriarchal norms of the Old Country that she finds untenable, yet she cannot live and write without their oppressive inspiration.

22 Partridge, "The Politics of Ethnic Authorship," 107.

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