

THE LOST AMERICA OF LOVE: A GENEALOGY

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Into the company of love
it all returns.

—Robert Creeley¹

I

This is apocryphal. A party in Hollywood, at which it was known that Liz would appear in the company of Eddie Fisher. Eddie is on the wane. Dick arrives, and while Liz and Dick have not yet consummated their love interest, the tension is electric. Having enjoyed as much of it as anyone can stand, it is time to leave. Liz has the look of one hypnotized, her car keys in her hand. Dick approaches, takes the keys. “You’re my girl.” “I’m your girl,” she repeats, and they go out together. And from that day forward, for as long as it lasts, Eddie is out of the picture.²

Love beckons, and I decide. I want to account for a particular version of “love” in its intersection with poetry as a construction of postmodern American poetics: from its apex among postwar writers grouped together as the New American Poets to its decline and fall with poets of the succeeding generation,

After the shipwreck, I managed to salvage only two texts from my extensive library—Sherman Paul’s *The Lost America of Love* and my own *Bad History*, which I had in any case more or less committed to memory. *The Lost America of Love* was a book I initially did not like when it was published, but there is nothing like free time on a desert island to reevaluate one’s responses. And of course, many memories of my personal association with Paul at the University of Iowa in the early 1970s came back to me on rereading his work. So, with nothing else to do, I wrote the following essay, which eventually led to Jeanne Heuvings’s invitation to present it at the University of Washington, in her lecture series on the poetics of “love,” in May 2000. By then I was already off the island. . . . but I kept with me the thoughts of a Lost America that occupied my time while there.

¹Robert Creeley, “For Love,” in *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley, 1945–1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); 257; hereafter *CP*.

²I am not sure of the provenance of this story. I must have heard or read it somewhere, but it is not relevant to my discussion to establish that any such event ever took place.

the Language School.³ In the genealogy of American poetry, love is a supreme concept of value that unites “the enduring experience of life,” in Robert Creeley’s formulation, with literary form. Love is decisive, its presence not to be disputed, and poetry can only follow it to the waiting Alfa Romeo outside. Reciprocally, poetry is the act of determining love: love is known only at a moment of crisis identified with poetic form, where it is revealed. Dick takes Liz’s car keys and the matter is settled: poetry and love leave hand in hand. The wheels of history stop, suspended; all America gapes at the hole in the tabloid. Love determines poetic form as a crisis of the other in the making of affective bonds (or to be more exact: a crisis of two others—the one who is chosen and the one who is left behind). As Freud remarked, there is no love that does not hurt someone: extended to poetry, love is a principle of form that is simultaneously a mechanism of abjection, a determinate of structure as much as of value.⁴

At an opposite end of the aesthetic spectrum, the poetry of the Language School has gone to great lengths to dismantle the conjunction of experience, decision, and form that fused love and literary value for the New Americans.⁵ While there are many points of contact between the two moments of American poetry, particularly in their valorization of “open” as opposed to “closed” form, in their construction and reception they are radically opposed at exactly the point of “love.” Looking toward the universality of love as horizon of experience, the New Americans may be said to have erected a cult of masterful presence: one of embodied decisiveness, immanent reflection, and temporal unfolding that makes poetry “a kind of act” based on the creation or destruction of affective bonds. The Language School is generally seen as going in the opposite direction:

³The New American Poets are, roughly, those poets of the 1950s brought together in Donald Allen’s epoch-making anthology *The New American Poets* (New York: Grove, 1960), and include writers identified with Black Mountain College, the San Francisco Renaissance, the New York School, and the Beat Generation. See also Allen and Warren Tallman, eds., *The Poetics of the New American Poetry* (New York: Grove, 1973).

⁴It would be interesting to compare this determinate relation of abjection and affect to the better known poetic principles of “ostranenie” and “equivalence” developed by the Russian Formalists and the Prague Structuralists.

⁵In the large bibliography of writing on the Language School, questions of form, method, politics, meaning, context, and value predominate. It is no exaggeration to say that more traditional poetic concerns of a personal nature—and of affective relations between individuals—have virtually no place in the reception of the Language School. The first anthologies of the Language School were Ron Silliman, ed., *In the American Tree* (Orono, Me.: National Poetry Foundation, 1975); and Douglas Messerli, ed., *“Language” Poetries* (New York: New Directions, 1986). Love is not a major topic in either.

embodied decisiveness translates into the open possibilities of form; immanent reflection is displaced onto the materials of language; and temporality is either objectified in the construction of long-term and spatially elaborate textual “matrices,” or is erased entirely in a poetry that bears no temporal signature or historical markers.⁶ Affect coincides with form primarily through a mechanism of displacement, leading to a possibility of regrounding subjectivity via semantic and affective shifts—but also to the removal of any act of decisiveness that determines knowledge or love in the first place. Rather than simply avoiding emotional experience, the work of the Language School relentlessly textualizes it, resulting in the unbounded aura of a deferred horizon of the affect formerly known as “love.”

In the decades out of which they emerged, the 1950s and 1960s, love was a cultural as much as literary imperative for the New Americans. The “lost America of love” Allen Ginsberg lamented in “A Supermarket in California” registered the “lacklove” of industrial consumer society, where Whitman cannot get a date and can only look for one among the “peaches and penumbras” of late-night capitalism.⁷ In the decades hence, the removal of decisiveness love entails, not only toward its objects but as a stance toward the world, has been redistributed everywhere in K Marts. The aporia of decision Ginsberg mourned in the supermarket is reinscribed in the marketing niches of a rationalized Life Course, where object choices and consumer choices intersect. We see this in the market-driven scripting of post-Gen X consumers in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, brought to you by Maybelline. Here the product is both object of love and its allure; if you are female, single, and 19–22 years old, according to market research, you may be targeted as a consumer of love—and may be the object of another’s desire, too. The act of decision hangs suspended as an illusory freedom of choice: Buffy is the universal slayer, fending off bad object choices (a.k.a. vampires) as she constructs the fantasmatic commodity of herself. Buffy the Vampire Slayer encountering Whitman’s ghost in a supermarket: the lonely old grubber disappears in purple mist, relegated to an afterworld America where he stands “watch-

⁶On the textualization of the Language School, see Barrett Watten, “What Is Literature?: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics,” in Romana Huk, ed., *Assembling Alternatives: Essays On/Against Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, forthcoming 2001).

⁷Allen Ginsberg, “A Supermarket in California,” *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956); in *Collected Poems, 1947–1980* (New York: Viking, 1984), 136.

ing the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe." Here the loss of the singular object, "America," is redistributed everywhere as a new object choice: "me."

After Ginsberg's "the weight of the world is love," after Williams's "the stain of love is on the world," after the ghost of Walt Whitman: *The Lost America of Love* is the title Emersonian critic Sherman Paul adopted for his book of reflections on the poetry of Robert Creeley, Edward Dorn, and Robert Duncan, published in 1981.⁸ Paul is a good candidate for a twentieth-century incarnation of "The American Scholar" of Emersonian renewal who performs "a creative reading as well as a creative writing." As an exemplary instance of the reception of the New Americans, Paul's book of fragmented, holistic, and often diaristic readings marks the conjunction of poetic form and literary value under the aspect of love. The result is an unapologetic instance of a poetics of presence, one that would be formally challenged by the Language School in poetry during the next decade, and that would be theoretically dismantled by the coming triumvirate of post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, and post-Marxist criticism as well. But it is precisely because the literary horizon of *The Lost America of Love* has been superseded that it provides a fascinating example for a discussion of the postwar construction of an ideology of love. It is as an index of reception, a historically specific construction of second-order discourse, in other words, that Paul's work is useful for understanding the New Americans in their mode of cultural reproduction. Where the New Americans imagined a horizon of decisiveness in love, for Paul—who embodies the late-symbolist concerns of scholars trained to read the correspondences of Hart Crane's *The Bridge* as a continuation of the tradition of Yeats as much as of Eliot—the critic's task is to show particular destinies in love as *sub specie eternitatis*, where love is the horizon of enduring value in form.⁹ A second-generation reading is thus needed to complete the form of the primary text in its horizon of universality. Third-generation revisionists such as myself must take on not only the poetics of the primary text but its mechanisms of valorization within the wider culture.

⁸Sherman Paul, *The Lost America of Love* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); hereafter cited as *LAL*.

⁹Paul's other books include *Emerson's Angle of Vision: Man and Nature in American Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952); *The Music of Survival: A Biography of a Poem by William Carlos Williams* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968); *Hart's Bridge* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972); *Olson's Push: Origin, Black Mountain, and Recent American Poetry* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); and *For Love of the World: Essays on Nature Writers* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992).

Central to Paul's project is an assertive challenge to critical orthodoxy: as reader and critic, Paul is also a deep admirer, in fact a "lover," of his selected authors and texts. Distance and objectification are foregone in favor of subjective investment and even the unfolding of a personal allegory unveiled in the historical and contextual experience of reading. My motives for reading Paul's text, and its allegorizing methods, stem as well from the valences of historical and contextual experience. There is a personal as well as literary dimension to this genealogy: Paul was my contact with the American tradition while an already inappropriately theorized poet otherwise mired in "creative writing" at the Iowa Writers Workshop in the early 1970s, even if I was not ready (or entirely willing) to accept his teaching. I first encountered Paul as a *student* in an experimental college course I organized on "The Modern Epic," where we read examples of the genre from *Paterson* to Robert Grenier's *A Day at the Beach*. That an endowed chair of the Emersonian tradition would accept the authority of a 23-year-old in leading a seminar now seems to me remarkable. In the course of the year, we read intensively in *The Maximus Poems*, and when Sherman Paul published *Olson's Push* in 1978, I was pleased to see my "action studies" seminar given an originary role. By the time *The Lost America of Love* appeared, my differences from the New American poets were increasing, and I was pursuing a poetry that sought anything but the immediate and spontaneous poetics that are the basis of Paul's mimetic account. This essay, in part, is a reconsideration of that divergence. In what follows, I pursue a revisionary reading of "the lost America of love," in its poetic texts and in Sherman Paul's exemplary account—not simply to dismiss it as superseded, but to investigate it as a prototype for a poetry and poetics that came after. Paul's creative readings will be my improbable guide in constructing a genealogy of love from the New Americans to the Language School, marking my ambivalence to the past masters' work with a counterexample from my own *Bad History*.

II

For most of the twentieth century, poetry has been a kind of test. The poem provided an object of disciplinary examination; the scene of reading was carefully controlled. Critics like Sherman Paul inherited this situation of poetry but, as Americanists, wanted to develop methods of reading that reflected on the tradition as much as they provided normative judgments. But while all three poets Paul discusses are firmly anchored in the American tradition, *The Lost America*

of Love risks coherence (and for that reason may warrant our attention) precisely at the scene of judgment. What results is an open and exploratory if at times unstable project: partly due to an insufficiency of criticism in the overestimation of its objects; and partly due to a shift in the cultural paradigms by which poetry would be read. Both anticipating the fragmentation of postmodern subjectivity and belated in its demand for authorial unity, Paul's manner of reading against the grain predicts the development of the genre of "poetics," at the time an important but secondary discourse for the New American poets, in the later work of the Language School.¹⁰

Paul's fragmentary/holistic readings are balanced between reverence for the authority of the poet and work, whose sublimity can only be approached, and a yearning for a radically open creative reading, very much within the Emersonian tradition, in which criticism is renewed in its encounter with an originary poetic truth. A kind of second-order textuality results, a hybrid of original work and reading that is as much the endgame of criticism as its renewal. A half decade after Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* was being translated by Gayatri Spivak down the hall of the English/Philosophy Building at the University of Iowa, Paul was reading poetry in a notably dissociative manner, but one still bound together by an American tradition figured in terms of the horizon of love. This critical act of love—vocalizing the critic's deep need to place poetry in the tradition—is almost unreadable today, even as it reveals a mode of poetic reproduction.

Begin anywhere. It will unravel. Why not take up his *Whitman*? Or that Sparrow essay on "life tracking itself"? [. . .]

Now, should he reissue *A Quick Graph*, he could add [his] introduction to section two, where he treats his predecessors—put Whitman there where he belongs, before Crane. In any case, it is characteristic "criticism": testamentary, generous in acknowledgment, directed to use. One of his best essays.

More is involved than what he says in the first sentence, with his obsessive *lovely* and *instances*. (Call these notes "The Lovely Instances of . . .") So Whitman instructs us to speak for ourselves. [. . .] It enables him to open the essay according to instructions: in his own voice, telling only what he knows, unassertively [. . .]. It makes possible—opens *possibility*, another insistence—a stance in criticism of the kind he takes in poetry. Open criticism. (3-4)

What follows is a kind of criticism *verité* that constructs a reading as a series of fragmentary and associative responses to the developing work. Paul's reading

¹⁰On the genre of "poetics," see Barrett Watten, "What I See in 'How I Became Hettie Jones,'" *Poetics Journal* 10 (1998), 113-21.

attends both to the unfolding of the poet's larger project (the "allegory" of the poet's life, for those following Olson) and to a phenomenology of internalized directives the poem encodes within itself as its formal necessity. There is no poetry, in this reading, that is not also criticism; poetry continually foregrounds its signposts of intentional orientation. Poetry as criticism is not yet language, but seeing poetry as an unfolding of intention within the larger matrix of tradition predicts the turn to language to be taken up by poets in the next generation. Reading Creeley for Paul becomes a reenactment of the formal self-reflexiveness of poetry, as is demonstrated in passages such as the following:

See Creeley's letter to Corman in *Origin # 2*: "Fragments. Like any man, is himself that collector, that center round which: such fly." (Olson's style) And why? ". . . to say I'm alive." To declare content. Form is the extension of content, the content within a man: "The phenomena outside the given man, around him, OBJECTS . . . are that which the content IN the man uses to declare itself—that this COMING OUT by means of the materials, MAKES the form." True of autobiography, *his story*. [. . .] Such writing locates the self in the fullness of its existence, mind in body, mind-and-body in the world. (8)

Imitating Creeley's dictum on the equivalence of form and content, Paul proceeds in a paratactic style that itself constructs a holistic system, in which the original text as referent is suspended in a series of reflexive predications.¹¹ Short sentences, no subject: this is the *modus operandi*. Love enacted between critic and poet takes place via a process of fragmentation and recovery, where the self-ottering of the poet is recuperated as critical self-consciousness.¹² Poetry in its second-order textualization is vocalized as a series of directives—a poetics that begins to look like a language—that enters one into the All.

Method and project. "You begin at any point, and move that point forward or backward, up or down. . . . In and out the system, as Buckminster Fuller would say. It's a system—of valuation, habit, complex organic data, the weather, and so on." Modus operandi of *Pieces, A Day Book*, and all that follows. And, increasingly, going forward by tracking backward. To what end? To witness. To tell *his story*. To do what Williams, cited here, does in "The Desert Music." Yes, to tell what he sees and hears. And hearing the music, dance the poem, the

¹¹On the legitimating strategy of the Creeley's famous dictum "form is never more than an extension of content," see Libbie Rifkin, *Career Moves :Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berigan, and the American Avant-Garde* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 49–51.

¹²On the homosociality of postwar American avant-gardes, see Michael Davidson, "Compulsory Homosociality: Charles Olson, Jack Spicer, and the Gender of Poetics," in Sue-Ellen Case et al., eds., *Cruising the Performative: Interventions into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Sexuality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Barrett Watten, "The Secret History of the Equal Sign: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Between Discourse and Text," *Poetics Today* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 581–628; and Rifkin, *Career Moves*, passim.

“agony of self-realization / bound into a whole / by that which surrounds us.”
(11)

The critic’s act of love is to reproduce the signposts by which the poet orients himself—here, systems theory, Buckminster Fuller, Williams in “The Desert Music”—and to bind them together in an overarching intention to “tell *his* story.”

At the heart of this lover’s discourse of tradition is Creeley’s own account of love, alternately aggressive, ameliorative, Christian, sadistic, Petrarchan or anti-Petrarchan, either praising or degrading its object. In Creeley’s early poetry, love provides an occasion for the radical resistance of poetry to any interpretative frame that may be imposed on it: otherwise put, interpretative closure is precisely the impossibility of love. In “The Whip,” a title Creeley also used for one his first books, the sleepless lover compares the woman beside him to one he imagines as “above us on / the roof, there was another woman I // had also loved, had / addressed myself to in // a fit she / returned.”¹³ In this fitful return, the shock of seeing love as displaced in another, undeniable because of the possibility of two others, makes it impossible to say what love is: “for which act // I think to say this / wrongly.” The poet speaks the impossibility of love = poetry is an impossible speech. In Paul’s reading, such impossibility is identified with affirmation; the negative is originary precisely as a ground for self in encounter with a denying source as “positively felt”:

Non-being. “The figure is not being.” But non-being is known as absence of being, is positively felt. By the self, which images its loss of being and desire for being in the figure at the window, at evening, looking out into the darkness.
(19)

Paul’s debt to Heidegger is evident here: the encounter with non-being offers the possibility for a return to being not limited by objectifying self-consciousness; the crisis of an encounter with alterity leads to a wider horizon. For Creeley, the knowledge of love—better put, the knowledge the poet seeks in love—is always located at such a moment of crisis or, when it becomes an assertion of value, is always rifted with tragic contingency or loss, the possibility that such may not always be the case. For Paul, this moment of undoing is sublated so that the unity of love may be passed down. As the crisis of love emerges in an experience of nonbeing at the source, he strains to reproduce it in his reading:

¹³Robert Creeley, “The Whip,” *Collected Poems*, 146.

Marriage. "Cruel, cruel to describe. . . ."—in poems that are operations. And nothing avails—neither wit nor humor—"as when for a lark / gaily, one hoists up a window / shut for many years." Nothing so devastating and vastating as *The Island*, though "La Noche," "The Whip" and "All That Is Lovely in Men," of part 1, compound his despair. And poem after later poem tells its recurrence, the despair of the unanswering "sleeping wife," the wife who is also Goddess. (27)

Paul's attempt to fold the crisis of the other into a recurrence that founds tradition leads to a typical result in the reception of the New American poets: the reduction of the other as "wife" to the Jung-inflected Goddess. In order to read Creeley's poetry as anything but the apotheosis of masculine anxiety in such reductive terms, we will have to translate the poet's self-destruction at the hands of Woman, from a heroic overcoming of alterity to a moment of recuperative regression.¹⁴ Paul's textualization of the crisis of love, on the other hand, fixes negativity in the object known as "Goddess" as it projects the poet's failure of decision onto a horizon of meaning, tradition, and, ultimately, language.¹⁵

At the center of Creeley's poetry of love is an agony of gendered subjectivity split in terms of its objects. In "The Whip," as in numerous poems, the poet clearly celebrates, even as he seems to want to perpetuate, a crisis in which decision will be experienced as loss. The loss of object anticipated in the failure of decision aligns poetic form with the deferral of any outcome: as long as the situation remains undecided, the poet may avoid the determination of fate as a form of judgment. The outcome of love hangs suspended in the starry firmament of the Symbolic Order, where *how it turns out* is not yet what *will have been*. Caught at the crossroads of his choice, however, the poet is both alienated and confirmed at the moment of decision: a double bind where even the refusal to decide is an outcome. Character is destiny, but Oedipal Law prefigures the poet. In his attempt to circumvent Oedipal Law, the poet is drawn to the only place he can imagine it as *not* prefigured in advance: the moment of decision in love.¹⁶ But

¹⁴On the projection of masculine anxiety, see Sianne Ngai, "Moody Subjects/Projectile Objects: Anxiety and Intellectual Dispositioning in Hitchcock, Heidegger, and Melville," *Qui Parle* 12, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2000/2001).

¹⁵On the coincidence of language and tradition, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1997), part 3.

¹⁶Creeley himself admits to Oedipal motives in the antiheroic epigraph to *Pieces*, when he cites the lines from Allen Ginsberg: "yes, yes, / that's what / I wanted, / I always wanted, / I always wanted, / to return / to the body / where I was born." While it is unlikely that Ginsberg would have been embarrassed by an Oedipal reading, in a late reprinting of the poem he substitutes a neutral placeholder for the feminine body: "to return / to my body / where I was born" (emphasis mine); compare "Song," in *Selected Poems, 1947–95* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 39–40; to the version in *Collected Poems*, 111–12. Creeley preserves the Oedipal implications in his use of the passage.

destiny as the achievement of symbolic form cannot be refused with a deferral of object choice; the form of the poem registers this refusal *as* destiny, on a higher plane.¹⁷ Either way, the subject is negatively determined: make a choice and refuse an object, or refuse choice itself in an order to preserve the object that is not chosen, which precedes choice. It follows that, in “The Whip” as elsewhere in Creeley, choice of object is suspended as a poetic necessity. In the classic account of Oedipus, there is no love that does not hurt someone; there are always three persons in love (typically, two connected in the legitimating orders of marriage and career, and one destructive of both).¹⁸ In the poem, the three persons of love are distributed without resolution, and that is their destiny: the poet turning in the night, a former lover or dream goddess on the roof, and real-time lover in bed. The poet places himself in a default position, unwilling to resolve a conflict between two kinds of lover, or even to determine which is which. The poem records a state of crisis where only form is decisive.

It is a welcome crisis, whose negative relation to the object is central to a genealogy of poetic form, from the New Americans to the present. Preserving this negativity is the work of the critic as well; in Paul’s reading, the aporia of decision is removed from the moment of encounter and recast in symbolic terms. If crisis is fixated in the object, there is an immediate payoff to her use as negation: the poet’s return to the “whole world”:

The persistent other, answering for the whole world (hole world, the emptiness, the space he would fill with something other than his emptiness; the silence, the “dull space” of suspension, out of which he would urge words). (33)

The woman as Goddess is a negative term (the “hole world, the emptiness, the space he would fill”), raised to the status of a preexisting universal but denied as a particular existent, that permits a recoding of impossibility as affirmation. As a symbol of inadequacy, or inadequate symbol, the other is so exaggerated in her all-encompassing proportions as to preclude any decision; she is simply the source of all that is, the undoing of specific agency in a holistic return. This is an initially intolerable but finally felicitous situation for the poet, who must fixate

¹⁷On ethics and the aporia of decision in the avant-garde, see Paul Mann, “For Anethics,” in *Masocriticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 195–274; Barrett Watten, review of *Masocriticism* by Paul Mann, *Textual Practice* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2000), 209–22.

¹⁸Sigmund Freud, “Contributions to the Psychology of Love: A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men,” in *Collected Papers*, ed. Joan Riviere, 5 vols. (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 4:192–202.

her as a threat to be overcome—precisely the bad fixation of Woman in the lyric tradition, where, as Laura Riding had pointed out, the impossibility of the word “woman” gives voice to the male poet.¹⁹ The imperative is to translate the crisis into other terms, which is precisely what both the poet and critic are doing: the Woman as bad object turns out to reflect the damaged imago of the poet, but only after poetic form or critical reading have projected the lack of his decision onto the horizon of language (as meaning and tradition) that both precedes and succeeds the refusal of object choice. The halting, indecisive style of Creeley’s work masks, here, a profound strategy of recuperation. In the recurrence of numerous moments of inadequacy in Creeley’s poetry, terms for a decision are unlinked from the failure of decision itself, seen as bounded by the form of the poem and, ultimately, the work as a whole. This is made possible by the poet, as terms for a decision *within* the poem fail to reach closure at the limits of form.

This logic of unresolvable contradiction, an emotional syllogism whose affective terms unfold in the wrong implicative order, recurs over and over in Creeley’s poetry. In “The Letter,” a poem from the middle section of *For Love* that recounts another failed attempt to solve triangulation at the crossroads of decision (“I did not expect you / to stay married to / one man all your life, / no matter you were his wife”; *CP*, 195), failure is an affirmation of self: “I thought the pain was endless— / but the form existent, / as it is form, / and as such I loved it.” Poetic form as pure crisis without resolution: this is definitive of love. Almost as an afterthought, the poet explains, “I loved you as well / even as you might tell, / giving evidence / as to how much was penitence”: while the poet loves the lure of irresolution that returns him to himself in the form of poem, the final injunction to “penitence” demands that he acknowledge the object in a poem celebrating her impossibility. Again, the three persons of love are suspended in irresolution: knowing in advance the lover will not leave her husband, the poet’s wish trades her bondage for his freedom, even as he claims to be defeated by the situation.²⁰ In guilt, conscience and object loss coincide in the formation

¹⁹Laura (Riding) Jackson, “The Word ‘Woman,’” in *The Word “Woman” and Other Related Writings*, ed. Elizabeth Friedmann and Alan J. Clark (New York: Persea, 1993), 7–122; Barrett Watten, “Modernist Posthistoire: Laura Riding as Finality,” in *Horizon Shift: Progress and Negativity in American Modernism* (forthcoming).

²⁰On the erotics of bondage as normative condition of love, see Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

²¹Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 106–31.

of the subject, as Judith Butler points out; the subject is the site of an interpellated command to give up his attachments as an acknowledgment of duty.²¹ The interpellation of guilt is discernable here at the level of poetic form, which becomes the site not only of restorative fantasy following the crisis of the self's undoing at the hands of the other, but of the internalization of an exteriorized demand, a calling into account. The crisis of the other thus becomes an occasion for the poet's internalization of conscience, as is evident in the persistent self-reflexivity of Creeley's work. The repeating crisis of the object, here, leads to an increasing demand on the subject: the poet's failure in decision becomes linked to the moment of interpellation, a self-reflexivity that is displaced onto the wider horizon of his *oeuvre* as it totalizes its own discursive comment on itself. Object loss and guilt conjoin to produce the "fullness of experience" endlessly insisted on in Creeley's poetry, in its self-reflexive celebration of the lost object of love.²²

But what of the Lady? Creeley's own critical commentary gives evidence of the self-consciousness with which he creates and maintains the crisis of the other as decisive moment of poetic form. Where Paul makes a conventional, and containable, figure for this willed self-undoing in the figure of the Goddess, in several early statements on poetics Creeley declares a much more volatile range of projections onto the placeholder of Woman. In "On Love," an essay published in the *Black Mountain Review* (1956), Creeley shows how far he will go to identify bad object choices as a necessity for poetry.²³ Having received a fan letter from "a lady" whom he "knows to be a fine one"—"Your letter came in a moment when my heart was limping. A star had come and I couldn't receive it for I was repenting pride"—he writes, "Should we roar with laughter—or what do we have to do with the moon, these days?" (305-6). In his reply, he recounts a series of misogynist literary anecdotes, from Stendhal's complaint that women are clueless when it comes to judging character; to Robert Duncan's figure "of a hysterical female figure on a roller coaster crying 'I love this'"; to Wyndham Lewis's fantasy in *Self Condemned* of the artist's wife being run over by a truck: "The poor hair was full of mud, which flattened it upon the skull. Her eye protruded" (307-8). The series ends with D. H. Lawrence:

²²On self-reflexivity in the lyric, but without consideration of its relation to the object, see Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

²³Robert Creeley, "On Love," in *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1970), 305-8; hereafter cited as QG.

But if your wife should accomplish for herself the sweetness of her own soul's possession, then gently, delicately let the new mode assert itself, the new mode of relation between you, with something of spontaneous paradise in it, the apple of knowledge at last digested. But, my word, what belly-aches meanwhile. The apple is harder to digest than a lead gun-cartridge. (308)

Behind these figures of Woman as pathetic, hysterical, and unselfconscious is the originary fantasy of the destructive Goddess. In two essays included in *A Quick Graph*, one on Swinburne and one titled "In Her Service Is Perfect Freedom," Creeley cites with fascination and horror the "White Goddess," Robert Graves's (now totally clichéd) portrait of the destructive energies of Laura Riding.²⁴ If the Goddess is, for Paul, a convention by which the crisis of gender may be contained, she is for Creeley, naturally, the moment of encounter itself: "The Goddess is a lovely, slender woman with a hooked nose, deathly pale face, lips as red as rowan-berries. . . . She will suddenly transform herself into sow, mare, bitch, vixen, she-ass, weasel, serpent, owl, she-wolf, tigress, mermaid or loathsome hag."²⁵ In the essay on Swinburne, Creeley associates this figure with a moment of erotic destruction at the heart of Swinburne's "algolagnia—the association of sexual fulfillment with pain"; in his poetry, a Lacanian "psychical fantasy of woman" connects the apotheosis and denigration of Woman as the site for the poet's destruction and reconstitution.²⁶ In an essay dealing with Graves's formulation directly, Creeley sees the White Goddess as the primary instance of the crisis that restores the poet to himself:

Because if you are a poet, you will know that presence of fate, against which you might, even effectually, interpose your own will—if you covet a quick death, and the loss of all you thought to honor. . . . The Goddess, whether characterized as the ultimately personal, or impersonal, wife, mother, queen, or simply the generically "unknown," is the most persistent *other* of our existence, eschewing male order, allowing us to live at last. The obedience of a poet's gratitude, for this, is the authority which you hear in his poems, and it is obedience to a presence which is, if you will, that which is not understood, ever; but which he characterizes as all that can happen in living, and seeks to form an emblem for, with words. (323)

²⁴Robert Creeley, "The Fascinating Bore" and "In Her Service Is Perfect Freedom," in *ibid.*, 255–60; 322–26.

²⁵Quoted in Creeley, "Fascinating Bore," 255.

²⁶Teresa Brennan elaborates on the "psychical fantasy of woman," based on untranslated sections of Lacan's Seminar XX, in *History After Lacan* (London: Routledge, 1995), *passim*; see also Jacques Lacan and the Ecole freudienne, *Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: Norton, 1982).

In this passage, Sadean cruelty, Zizekian negativity, ambivalence, and desire for self-undoing are all projected onto the figure of Woman. Woman is destruction at the hands of fate (“the loss of all you thought to honor”) and recurrent threat (“the most persistent other”); at the same time she lets the poet go beyond himself, “allowing [him] to live at last”—providing a basis for *his* authority in surrendering to her as “that which is not understood [but is] all that can happen in living.” In the progressive unfolding of his work, the figure of Woman at the crossroads of self provides the centerpiece for each of Creeley’s early collections: “The Door” in *For Love*; “Anger” in *Words*; “The Finger” in *Pieces*. In “The Door,” one of his greatest poems, Creeley reworks a more benign lyric by Graves of the same title, through the figure of the White Goddess, into a register of sublimity that casts the poet into an outer darkness from which she is entirely radiant: “But the Lady is indefinable, / she will be the door in the wall / to the garden in sunlight. / I will go on talking forever” (*CP*, 201).²⁷ By the time of “The Finger,” the figure of the Lady as primordial source of poetic truth in self-annihilation reaches an outer limit of restatement, once and for all time: “Her face / was all distance, her eyes / the depth of all one had thought of, / again and again and again. // To approach, to hold her, / was not possible” (*CP*, 387). Here, crisis coincides with repetition as determinate of poetic form; in an epigraph, Creeley identifies this dynamic in a citation from Williams: “There is, in short, / a counter stress, / born of the sexual shock, / which survives it / consonant with the moon, / to keep its own mind” (*CP*, 260). The intervallic coherence of the larger form of Creeley’s work is due precisely to a repeated return to self after “sexual shock.”

In the ultimate horizon of Paul’s reading, sexual shock returns to the “enduring experience of life,” to a place “where the heart is open” and “where one finds rest” (24):

Place in the world, the human dwelling *they* build, not of words, as he does privately, but of sticks and stones. (Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me. Reverse that.) Not a perfect place—it is built in recognition of that impossibility: of intervals, one by one, here / there; of the rhythms, the process, the changes. (36)

The sequence of love’s encounters—in the particular persons and situations of love—becomes a form in which impossibility is measured out in intervals, predicating a place of return in the imagination that is identified with the All—the

²⁷Compare Creeley’s modest discussion of Graves’s earlier poem; “In Her Service,” 325.

horizon of meaning and tradition in language. What is missing in Paul's account, however, is precisely what motivates the intervallic organization of major form: the compulsion to repeat registered in the return of conscience in the destruction of the object. Rather, there is a simple assertion of continuity in place of the self-undoing encounter, in Paul's reading, in an endless reinforcement of experience, process, and unity as the horizon of Creeley's work:

Unity is the locus of experience. The self experiencing is ground, a center of the forever-weaving fabric of attentions. Familiar insistences, obsessive concerns. Tightly woven, reflexive (recurrent). Yet a movement of thought, sequential, moving "forward" (in time) not to exhaust itself so much as to find resolution.
(40)

The test of Paul's rewriting of poetic negativity as second-order discourse comes in his reading of the fragmented form of *Pieces*, the 1969 collection in which Creeley moved from identification of lyric form with crisis toward its distribution in a total poetics. *Pieces* was written during a period of social as well as personal crisis for Creeley (however continuous or even normative it may have seemed at the time), though there is little evidence of the Vietnam War in the book, as I have discussed elsewhere.²⁸ Paul's reading appears now as a *rappel à l'ordre* in which the horizon of tradition is reaffirmed in the face of a total political crisis (whose immediacy for the culture at large was growing more remote by the end of the 1970s). We are moving away from identifying with the poet's survival after the "sexual shock" of a decisive encounter and toward a restored horizon of love as literary value, even if an open and fragmentary one. A conservative process of reconstitution emerges in the many instances in Creeley's work where love is proposed as a transcendent value, as in a fragment in *Pieces* where Paul sees "love's triumph" (49):

The card which is the
four of hearts must
mean enduring experience
of life. What other
meaning could it have. (CP, 399)

In my own reading, it is a radical doubt that the four of hearts might *not* mean "enduring experience of life" but something more sinister which makes this an interesting fragment. The "enduring experience of life" may be merely a card

²⁸Barrett Watten, "The Turn to Language in the 1960s," paper delivered at "The Opening of the Field: North American Poetry of the 1960s," University of Maine, June 2000.

dealt by mysterious fate, and one is not that likely to get it if there are fifty-two in the deck. There are fifty-one less felicitous outcomes than an “enduring experience of life,” perhaps. But even if one is dealt that card, its disclosure is the result of a decision made permanent, a fact of experience, either happy or not—but fixed. It is as if to say that, at the moment of truth, one might as well have flipped a coin—thus making experience a pure contingency of “only an outcome endures.” Even more unsettling is the possibility that the deck is stacked, made up of fifty-two copies of the four of hearts, and they *all* mean “enduring experience of life” for a monad in a panopticon; one can only wish for a return to contingency and risk. In Paul’s reading, however, these darker (or simply more accurate) readings are foreclosed:

“To ‘return’ not to oneself as some egocentric center, but to experience oneself as *in* the world. . . .” / Say of him what he said of Williams, that it’s not a question of which poems are good or bad because what matters is that “it all coheres.” (57)

An eternal return, but to indecision, indeed may be seen in numerous instances in Creeley’s mid-career work in which a crisis requiring an ethical choice is emptied of any significance insofar as it is identified with the merely historical. In one entry from *Pieces*, “The News”: “Unresponsible / people versus // serious people. In / New Brunswick / this is a problem. / • / The language / of instruction / for their children . . .” (*CP*, 430). Resolution, here—of whether the language of instruction in New Brunswick will be in French or English—is of little concern to Creeley, even if a decision is necessary. Rather, such a moment of pseudo-crisis is reduced to a “late / film and / video tape / report,” comparable to a billboard or sign passing by in a flash on a thruway: “NIAGARA MOHAWK.” An empty message on a billboard is his ironic solution to a political crisis of language. Such a condensation of an ethical decision to a mere effect of repetition will be a hallmark of Creeley’s poetry forthwith; one may well question here whether poetry can have anything to say about a decision, and if not, whether it has severed itself from ethics. At the same time, continuity and meaningfulness of experience is precisely what is being asserted as value against the contingency of any outcome. The other begins to turn into a mere placeholder in Creeley’s poetry, threatening to drop out of it entirely, as in this poem from *Thirty Things*: “Sitting next to you / was a place you thought / she was, he was, // sitting next to you / a sense of something / alike, but you, // *but you*” (*CP*, 578).

A major difference between Creeley's poetics and Paul's reading emerges here. The poet seems well aware of how problematic his relation to the other is in this poem, attempting yet again to provoke a crisis of conscience—so as to open up once again the moment of decision—even in its seeming refusal. Rather than simply absorbing the other, the poem foregrounds a record of the encounter, at least, in its obdurate language: “*but you.*” In its guilty refusal to entirely sublimate the other, even in her manifest denial, the love realized by the poet is more agnostic than transcendental. If there is an entry into tradition, it carries with it the marks of failed sociality identified with a lost America to begin with. Love's agnostic relation to the object, the injunction to a return, leads to a persistent demand for an account of the position of the other in Creeley's work, whether it be Goddess, French Canadian, or dinner partner. In his act of love in reading Creeley, Paul enviously assumes the irrelevance of the third person in love, either in either affective or historical terms; the poem's crisis of the object is sublated. The result is a cathexis of poetry as Oedipal object which, as objectified and sublime and hence inaccessible, leads to a self-shattering in the critic that is at the same time an entry into the matrix (feminine) of tradition. This default of subjectivity to the object is recast as an effect of language; I can only suggest the degree to which such an envious recathexis of poetry is reproduced in the reception of other kinds of poetry as a vehicle of literary transmission.²⁹

What is uncanny is the degree to which Creeley manages to anticipate the critic's inability to locate the ethical implications of his crisis of love. Paul's response to a poem from *Later* exemplifies just the kind of reductive misreading I find problematic:

The cadences of the last three verses already pounds with the heart beat, the very heart beat (*thump bump*) that is indeed the eloquent articulation of his vital being (life and love; life = love). The heart is literally here; he gives it to us. (64)

Paul misses the possibility that “*thump bump*” may register the heart missing a beat, rather than continuing in a regular rhythm—an unsettling possibility for the poet at the age at which the poem was written. The reductiveness of Paul's reading of this moment of embodied self-consciousness anticipates Creeley's own leveling insistence in “The Plan Is the Body,” the ending of which repeats the line “the plan is the body” as the horizon in which the outcome of any decision is fixed (*CP*, 602). Certainly, Creeley is not immune to the seductions of

²⁹On poetry and envy, see Watten, “Secret History.”

universality. But the ironic obduracy of the language substituted by the poem for the body's plan returns us to a register, however opaque given the literal reading, of a generative moment of self-negating indecision. Paul's valorization of the horizon of love with the self-evidence of the body, on the other hand, identifies coherence with a preemptive decision distributed everywhere in the unfolding of experience:

Putting away the preoccupations with the past and future [. . .] he now attends the now (here/now) and appreciates "the wonder of life is / that *it is* at all"—lines that echo Wittgenstein, "It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists." Creeley's lines are to be read in a double way, that *being*, *existence* is the wonder of life, and that *that* should be is indeed a wonder. (70)

Wonder, like a mysterious rain of particularly, is everywhere. But if we want to avoid the leveling consequences for agency in this existential heaven, we must look for alternative readings that recover moments of crisis, indecision, and obduracy in Creeley's work.³⁰

III

What if crisis is outward and historical, as well as a negotiation of self with the object? This essay is being written twenty-five years after the Fall of Saigon, when North Vietnamese tanks led by Colonel Bui Tin overran the Presidential Palace, replacing the yellow and scarlet flag with a yellow star on oxblood red.³¹ Robert Creeley, "so-called poet of love," scarcely mentions the war; in the course of his *Collected Poems*, which also ends in 1975, it is hinted at only a few times (e.g., "The / war had stopped fifteen / minutes previous, we / had stopped in a bar // to celebrate"; 484), although he claims it defined the period for him.³² With the end of war, and the undoing of the stalemated crisis of Vietnam in the mid 1970s, the poetics of the lost America of love came to a historical impasse. Poetry as the vehicle of the soul's unfolding, or "ensouling" in the Emersonian

³⁰In my own parallel text to Creeley, the fantasy of restorative self-undoing at the hands of Woman is recast via a matrix of external events, many not directly connected to the moment of crisis but generalized as the structure of decision regardless; Barrett Watten, "The Door," in *Bad History* (Berkeley, Calif.: Atelos Press, 1998), 98–101.

³¹It was begun on 1 May 2000, twenty-fifth anniversary of the end of the war, and revised in November 2000, at the time of the first U.S. presidential visit to Vietnam.

³²See Creeley's discussion of the war and the responsibility of the poet in *Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961–1971*, ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas, Calif.: Four Seasons Foundation), esp. 82–83.

³³For an Emersonian account of how the "eternal order" of poetry is a register of history—published at the peak of the Vietnam War—see Robert Duncan, *The Truth and Life of Myth: An Essay in Essential Autobiography* (Fremont, Mich.: Sumac Press, 1968).

tradition—which had developed in opposition to, but still alongside with, the Cold War and its crisis in the 1960s—proposed its own eternal orders as a paradoxical register of historical events.³³ History, as “the tale of the tribe,” must still be authorized by the poet, even and especially in the denial of history. Retrospectively, we may find this canceled register of history precisely in the gaps and elisions of the ostensibly personal crisis of love in Creeley’s poetry, and can continue to read its record in the historiographical poetics of the two other poets Paul reads, Edward Dorn and Robert Duncan.

Taking up their work in 1979, Paul constructs a totalizing poetics of correspondence, a grand metaphorical structure of ensouling, out of the crisis of love in our lost America. If “the work of politics is to restore love” (107), its poetic entailment is to reconfigure history as an unfolding series of encounters, both positive and negative, that measure history in terms of love’s (im)possibility—encounters that are redistributed in the order of poetry itself, seen as a self-reflexive act. This is how poets in the lyric tradition such as Creeley and Dorn construct political meaning in the unfolding of their work within its historical context: love not only provides the deferred ideal that measures the historical, but is itself made out of the displacements of history as they are interpreted as tokens of redemption and reintegrated in eschatology. For Whitman, as precedent master of love, it will be remembered, “the poet is the president of regulation”: actual presidents are inserted into that order only as permitted by the poet, love giving the rule by which they take their place in the poem. The prevailing strategy among the New American poets, however, counters Whitman in disavowing the names of power (it would be hard to imagine Olson, say, writing a variation on “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”) and focusing on a dispersed condition of exile from the dominant order. Whitman’s order of poetic regulation is thus interpreted by the New Americans, from within the tradition, as an ironic but totalizing distancing of the forms of power—in order to delineate its perceived withdrawal from experience, but also to recuperate it, even more entirely, in the figure of the poet. The critic’s task is to read the order of regulation given to history by the poet in displacing its argument of power. In an erotics of mastery and submission, the critic produces an ordered discourse out of the historical crisis the poet defers and contains. In Paul’s criticism, this will entail his by-now familiar style of re-telling in which, out of the rupture (rapture) of reading, the particular and historical occasions of poetry assume the regularity of discourse.

Dorn's early poetry inflects the lyric tradition with culturally specific meanings, but aesthetic distance and the precision of form always maintain the upper hand. His interest for Paul, however, clearly begins when an underlying rift of "meanness" as index to American culture reveals itself as central to the poet's task: "You don't mess with Dorn" (78); he is "the ever-tougher poet who yields less of his spirit and, in this withholding and intransigence and in the careful work of poetry, may be telling us how to survive" (79). The progress of Dorn's lyricism from his first books *The Newly Fallen* and *Hands Up* to the more meditative and rhetorical structures of *Idaho Out* and *Geography* is marked by an increasing thematization of culturally specific meanness.³⁴ The development of his poetic means—from the lyric to more discursive, historical meditations—is paralleled by the construction of an authorial stance thoroughly educated in cultural loss: "He simply put himself where he had found himself from the time of his childhood in Illinois, outside, at the edge, at a distance from the dominant, urban, corporate, collective America. [. . .] Like Thoreau he practices refusals" (80). In moving from the "the great geography of my lunacy" to the literal landscape of the American West, lyric subjectivity is displaced onto cultural morphology, even as Dorn still preserves a lyric moment of "direct perception" as a determinant of cultural meaning. An entire poetics results, out of the encounter of lyric poet and fallen culture, that is mirrored in Paul's totalizing reinscription of negativity and loss. Dorn's poetic record of historical trauma—from the American depression to the internal exiles of Western isolatoes—is celebrated by Paul for its persistence in alienated culture and history that will turn out to be the *via negativa* of love:

No sustenance from the past, western or middle western, the later closed out in "Obituary." No sustenance in the present, in "forgotten towns" like that of "In the Morning," with its "rising holocaust of down people." Nothing heartening in the vista from his porch, the rising smoke of far-off Los Alamos signaling "its various technical plantations of death." Not just buying and selling lays waste our lives. Which is why, in the penultimate poem, he finds himself in America, weary and disconsolate, "slowly walking around the desecrated bandstand, waiting / for the decade, and the facetious new arrivals." (92)

In a cultural morphology of lyric displacement, Dorn often embeds a moment of disrupted affect, a kind of negative "spot of time," within a poetic

³⁴Dorn's early books—*The Newly Fallen* (1961), *Hands Up!* (1964), *From Gloucester Out* (1964), *Geography* (1965), *The North Atlantic Turbine* (1967), *Twenty-Four Love Poems* (1969), and *Songs, Set Two* (1970)—are brought together, with additional work, in *Collected Poems, 1956–1974* (Bollinas, Calif.: Four Seasons Foundation, 1975); hereafter cited as CP.

continuum of location and movement. In a series of didactic poems from the mid 1960s—"The Land Below," "From Gloucester Out," "West of Moab," "Idaho Out," and, in *The North Atlantic Turbine*, "Oxford"—this continuity typically takes the form of cross-country travel, by car or train, in which a series of peak moments of cultural insight occurs within often digressive trains of thought. Dorn comments on this relation between lyric moment and discourse in "The Open Road," where a fragment of William Carlos Williams's "This Is Just to Say" is placed in ironic counterpoint to the poet's self-reflexive soliloquy (*CP*, 17-21). Just as the form of Creeley's *Pieces* prefigures Paul's style of fragmented reading, so this recurring pattern in Dorn's unfolding development intersects with the critic's totalizing synthesis. Seeing his reading as a parallel to Dorn's meditative form, he describes "The Land Below" as "a desultory long poem of diverse materials and many voices—the voice, in fact, of primary importance, as always in his poems, modulating/contrasting with the meditative movement, the journey through inner and outer space, of mind-and-world" (95). The poet is a kind of cultural scanner, passing over the cultural detritus of the deformed present in order to extract a series of primary data toward the increasing equivalence of "insidereal" and "outsidereal."³⁵ The critic follows the poet in reading the record of culture as culture itself, in a continuum that is simultaneously poetry and critique.

To comprehend the stakes of this critique, we may compare Paul's practice of reading by analogy with Robert Von Hallberg's later, arguably more careful approach.³⁶ Like Paul, Von Hallberg focuses on the discursive stakes of negativity, which he terms the "contingent" or "accidental," for politics. In the development of Dorn's political poetry, he finds an unresolved conflict between strong reactions to particulars and weak political conclusions. In "My Mother's Debt to Sears Roebuck," Dorn's focus on the emotional structure of his mother's debt falls short of linking perception with efficient cause, thus remaining trapped within lyric assumptions. In "The Problem of the Poem for My Daughter, Left Unsolved," Dorn places the evidence of his daughter's suffering vividly before the reader ("a thin line red with its own distinction / some goiter / of what she

³⁵The terms "insidereal" and "outsidereal" appear in Dorn's mock epic *Gunslinger*, published in several installments from 1968–72 and collected as *Slinger* (Berkeley, Calif.: Wingbow Press, 1975).

³⁵The terms "insidereal" and "outsidereal" appear in Dorn's mock epic *Gunslinger*, published in several installments from 1968–72 and collected as *Slinger* (Berkeley, Calif.: Wingbow Press, 1975).

³⁶Robert Von Hallberg, "This Marvelous Accidentalism," in Donald Wesling, ed., *Internal Resistances: The Poetry of Edward Dorn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 45–86.

has been made to understand is civilization / not the brand of the adventurous cutlass"; *CP*, 92) but refuses to make a clear political point of it. Von Hallberg writes:

When suffering was profound, it was endured by classes. [. . .] Now suffering is superficial and cuts across what remains of the class structure. What has been lost is clarity and access to understanding. Dorn's method struggles against that loss. He skips back and forth in this poem between his daughter's misery, her literally "superficial" suffering of this scar on her neck, and the diffuse misery of Americans who are incapable of deep suffering, incapable of genuine culture. (61-62)

The shock of encounter, with his daughter's scar or other hidden injuries of class made visible in the poem, is not adequately motivated for Von Hallberg. The contrast remains diffuse and ironic; Dorn is "more an ironist than an explainer" (66) and should be read within a tradition of (mere?) poetic commentary (a reading supported by Dorn's later forays into ironic epigraph in *Hello, La Jolla*). Von Hallberg's criticism is also supported by a correspondence between Dorn and LeRoi Jones in the early 1960s, in which Dorn rejects imposing specific political meanings on observed details. The shock of disturbing detail should be suspended in poetry "in the same way junk gathering sculpture is," demonstrating how "gratifying accidents are a really bigger part of the West" than the aestheticization of politics.³⁷ The implications for politics are negative for Von Hallberg:

He believed that he could easily write around the ideological encampments that are usually the governing forces, rhetorically and thematically, of political poetry. For him, ideological differences were "accidental" rather than essential. (58)

It is specifically to reclaim the wider horizons of the current usage of "ideological" (after Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, among others) that Paul's reading, precisely in its fantasmatic subjectivity and erotic cathexis, is still valid.³⁸ In his account of the poem, the daughter's scar is one of a series of negative moments, in a composition by field in which the culture at large reveals itself in its many instances of lack. "The diffuse misery of others" here becomes concrete and real, a terrifying encounter in which the poet is moved

by the "shocked woman" he sees in the supermarket, a lower-class woman beat down by "a brutal economic calculus," exploited like the land (he speaks of the "exhausted mesabas . . . of breasts"), denied the very culture enjoyed at her

³⁷Edward Dorn to LeRoi Jones, 10 October 1961; quoted in *ibid.*, 58.

³⁸On the theory of ideology, see Ernesto Laclau, "The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology," *MLN* 112, no. 3 (1997): 297-321.

expense, and so much afflicted by the “huge meanness / ‘the measureless crudity of the States’” that she is deprived of citizenship (“all men and women / who suffer deeply . . . / cannot be U.S. Citizens”). Moved, to outrage and scorn by “a world where no thing thrives short of the total pestilence / of the spirit,” by the “technological provisioned” culture—less culture, the “totally onanized culture.” (106)

Dorn’s perception in the poem is “instinctual/erotic” in a way that Paul associates with the writing of Thorstein Veblen, evoking in turn the critic’s passionate response. Paul’s prose is no more purple than its original, but it is the greater regularity, even predictability, of its interpretation that distinguishes it from its object.³⁹ The question is how such regularity takes over as the tenor of the soul’s unfolding that is predicated on the vehicle of Dorn’s work. A relation of discursive “regularity in dispersion” to poetry as “sublime object” appears in the insistence on origin in Paul’s totalizing eschatology, where “my beginning is my end” is confirmed by the *via negativa* of Dorn’s exemplary moments. In the all-encompassing horizon of Paul’s reading of Dorn, absence becomes presence: “the poverty, the smells, what I remember of the girls I wanted, too late” are “essential accounts—accountings—of the ‘absolute meanness,’ the ‘utter defeat and utter hopelessness’” as the immediate site of a demand for fullness and plenitude: “‘We needed love. We couldn’t have it’” (108). Conversely, the particulars of the poem become an index of absence: in Paul’s generational identification with Dorn, “It all goes back [. . .] to the America we knew before World War II, that lost America; especially the rememberers [. . .] can tell how much was lost” (87). As ideological critique, Dorn’s poetry demands that this conflict of positive and negative ascription remain suspended in discourse, unresolved.

Such ambivalence extends to figures for the poet himself, who is alternately the Lonesome Cowboy on the Painted Desert (“so we have a blue cowboy. A Picasso cowboy, of the blue period, with that self-enclosing posture? A delicate cowboy of another color”; 91) and undone in an encounter with the Native American as prior and genuine other. These figures align in the traditional

³⁹In Michel Foucault’s account of discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the basis of “regularity in dispersion” is an equivalence of like and unlike founded on the absence of any origin; Žižek’s linking of ideological fantasy to its “sublime object” further articulates that negative moment; *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972); Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989); Žižek, “Beyond Discourse Analysis,” in Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), 249–60.

American trope of the *isolato*, the outsider, loner, marginalized cowboy/Indian as *synecdoche* both for the poet and his undoing:

To find an Indian you must go where he is [as the cowboy poet goes]; in (some) bars and taverns, in front of general stores, in enclaves no longer marked by railroad tracks but by dead cars, on highways and dirt roads, in reservations, and if you are lucky (deserving) in an abandoned-seeming clapboard house, in the uncut grass, beyond three gates. You must not only look for him but know how to look at him, to recognize him. And contact makes the shock of recognition. (129)

Cowboy meets Indian, self meets other, in a moment of (mis)recognition found everywhere in Dorn's poetics.⁴⁰ Identification of lack in the other is distributed in the unfolding of love; love becomes an ideology critique of negative particulars that infer a missing whole. This totalizing effect begins in the particular instances of Dorn's poetry, but it will only be brought to completion in the second-order discourse of Paul's reading, based on a discursive equivalence of like and unlike (a cowboy is not an Indian; both are *isolatoes*) that makes a "regularity in dispersion" of Dorn's open-field poetry. This construction is the basis of the ideological effects of the New Americans: it is not simply their relation to experiential materials or inexpressible crisis, but the way in which a poetics of open form leads to the regulated, and regulating, equivalences of a second-order discourse.

What, then, of the decisiveness of love in its determination of crisis that is made into an existential register in Creeley's poetry? After his lyrical beginnings, the crisis of love is increasingly generalized in Dorn's poetry as a politics of lost America. It is the experience of "lacklove" in its objects as they declare the universal absence of an ideal democratic order, whose hierarchy of value is a strict inversion of a "god everywhere" only locatable in its absences, identified with that which it denies. Individual instances of this crisis only serve to reconfirm this precedent loss, a default to totality that is an increasing principle of regularity in Dorn's work. We may see the continuity of Dorn's work partly in terms of a series of attempts to defeat this regularity—which is really the problem of repeti-

⁴⁰Here, liberal abjection (the foundation of liberal polity on that which is excluded from it—the drunken Indian, the crack addict, the street person) becomes a principle of aesthetic form at a basic moment of equivalence, of unlike seen as like, presence equated with absence, that is misunderstood as "recognition." One might go on to identify such an aesthetic use of liberal abjection in John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg's use of found materials; Jackson Mac Low's poetics of aleatorical method; the antiformal apoetics of some of my colleagues in the Language School, with the "controlling interests" of their politics of nonreferential subjectivation . . .

tion as desired self-undoing—as he vacillates between lyric and history. On the one hand, the discursive modes of *Geography* and *The North Atlantic Turbine* look ahead to Dorn's poetics of historical/hysterical irony in the lost epic of *Gun-slinger*; on the other, the lyric is preserved in the fine, if constrained and displaced, examples of *Love Songs* and *Songs: Set Two: A Short Count*. Dorn attempts to bring both modes together in the works published after *Collected Poems: Hello La Jolla, Yellow Lola, and Abhorrences*, as he approaches a decade of increasing public silence in 1990s.⁴¹ Many readers find the attention span of these poems to be diminished to the point of atrophy, the intention toward ideology critique dissolving in a poetic register so elliptical as to seem paranoid.⁴²

For Paul, however, Dorn's crisis remains simply that of the lost America of love, universalized by a poetic method in which "a poets occupation / is to compose poetry / The writing of it / is everywhere" (*HLJ*, ix) and "everywhere—even La Jolla—provides the occasion for poetry" (*LAL*, 163). The move is from history to atomized bits, each of which marks its own devolution of love; a wider horizon of historical context is necessitated by their self-undoing: "History replaces his-story. [. . .] Dorn is not giving us his story as in his earlier work, but "data clusters" relating to the immediate cultural occasion" (164). A double movement is registered by the critic: as Dorn moves away from what Paul recognizes as poetic coherence, the love that binds together the lost America, he attempts to escape the metaphorizing overlay of second-order readings like Paul's in continuing to provoke a crisis in poetry—identified as the "outwardness" of historical events. Where the crisis of America as "lacklove" provides a tenor for a poetics of love for the critic, the poet's political refusal of metaphorical discourse leads to a self-destructive stasis in which "the most oecological way / to kill the fleas / is to kill the dog" (161). The fleas are poetry and the dog is the

⁴¹Edward Dorn, *Hello, La Jolla* (Berkeley, Calif.: Wingbow Press, 1978); *Yellow Lola, Formerly Titled Japanese Neon* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Wingbow Editions, 1982); and *Abhorrences* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Black Sparrow Press, 1990).

⁴²One could go even farther in that direction, however. There are certain contemporary poets whose work, in comparison, makes Dorn's fragments look almost novelistic.

poet, in a moment of ironic self-mockery. In their logic of paradox, Dorn's trivial pursuits start to slip from historical necessity that locates them, precisely because they can only focus their distancing irony on themselves. It is here that only a total recuperation, not simply a reserved judgment, by the critic may save them:⁴³

Aphorism closes rather than opens the field. It expresses an extremity of disaffiliation. Yes, because, as *disaffiliate* reminds us, a primary meaning is dissociation from a gangster-ridden organization. "A for Ism": that is, telling instances of the Ism of our time, our very culture, *Americanism*, the very much lost America of love for which it is now so hard to summon any love. (159)

In textbook example of what I will call the "elliptical fallacy," Dorn's poetry of ironized perpetual crisis demands a wider horizon of historical context in order for its negation to signify. In its totalizing recuperation by criticism, however, it is precisely this historical context that is replaced, leaving Dorn holding the bag filled with meaningless rubble. Dorn enacts a Law of Diminishing Returns, attempting simultaneously to preserve and destroy the historical horizon that gives his negative introjects their meaning and necessity, as in: "Alaska / is the Raquel Welch / of landscape" (*YL*, 79). Yet it is precisely in its need for the recuperation of its moments of negation within a restorative discourse that the possibility of Dorn's late work, if not always the execution, is a central example of poetics as ideology critique within the totalizing horizons of late capitalism. Serial negativity, rather than any return to love, is Dorn's legacy after the Fall of Saigon.

IV

In the historical period of his emergence, Robert Duncan can be said to have desired, prophesied, and even acted out ahead of time a Fall of Saigon in his verse of the 1960s. Duncan's poetry, which has not yet been read as a historical

⁴³Another such critic is Alan Golding, "Edward Dorn's 'Pontifical Use of the Art': *Hello, La Jolla* and *Yellow Lola*," in Wesling, *Internal Resistances*, 208–34. Golding offers a different assessment of Dorn's aphoristic politics than von Hallberg's: "The poet's role, he believes, is not to offer schematic oppositions to the culture's 'morbid symptoms'; rather, it is to help his culture diagnose and explain these symptoms by offering a new language for the diagnosis"; (218). The poet thus shuns the entrapments of ideology in a positive sense ("But one need not wave partisan flags to be an effective political poet"; 230), while offering a distancing judgment as corrective, which raises consciousness even as it may discomfort us: "Dorn sees piercingly, unrelentingly, and to our discomfort he names names: he has seen the enemy, and the enemy is us" (234). Golding leaves off his discussion exactly where the later revival of ideology critique would begin: that Dorn's incorporation of his own symptoms, not just judgment of the culture's at large, are the locus both of the later poetry's possibilities and of their weaknesses.

index of the political unconscious of that decade, juxtaposes the sweetness and light of the spirit of romance and its apotheosis in the Divine Comedy's allegory of love with the permanent revolution of historical trauma: his America is not only lost but held in the grip of demonic powers. Following the Freudian lead of Norman O. Brown in *Life Against Death*, the antagonistic relation of love and history becomes a major axis of thematic continuity in his fragmented epic project, "Passages."⁴⁴ As is true of the other major New Americans, form is a decisive component of argument; in the fragmentary unfolding of "Passages," Duncan self-consciously reenacts Ezra Pound's refusal of ending in *The Cantos*, "I cannot make it cohere," as a horizon of his unfolding poem.⁴⁵ Like "The Structure of Rime," another open poetic series, "Passages" occurs only in displaced intervals in his work, from its inception in *Bending the Bow* (1968) through the two volumes of *Ground Work* (1984, 1987).⁴⁶ "Passages" provides a central instance of the lost America of love in its articulation of a historical poetics, playing off destruction and war toward an unfolding of cosmic correspondences, and it is positioned as just such a conclusive moment in Paul's reading.

Duncan announces the centrality of war (or what Laclau and Žižek would term "antagonism," its discursive equivalent) to his poetics at the outset of *Bending the Bow*:

We enter again and again the last days of our own history, for everywhere living productive forms in the evolution of forms fail, weaken, or grow monstrous. We do not mean an empire; a war then, as if to hold all China or the ancient sea at bay, breaks out at a boundary we name *ours*. It is a boundary beyond our understanding. Now, where other nations before us have floundered, we flounder. To defend a form that our very defense corrupts. We cannot rid ourselves of the form to which we now belong. And in this drama of our own desperation we are drawn into a foreign desperation. For our defense we have invaded an area of our selves that troubled us. Cities laid waste, villages destroyed, men, women and children hunted down in their fields, forest poisoned, herds of elephants screaming under our fire—it is all so distant from us we hear only what we imagine, making up what surely we are doing. When in moments of vision I see back of the photograph details and the daily body counts actual bodies in

⁴⁴Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1959).

⁴⁵As Paul notes, "in prefatory remarks made on reading some of the sequence, he is exclusively concerned with its formal nature, with a sequence which as no 'consequence,' that is, has 'no beginning and no end as its condition of form'"; *Lost America of Love*, 267. On Pound's inability "to make it cohere," see Duncan, *Truth and Life of Myth*, 65.

⁴⁶Robert Duncan, *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1968); hereafter cited as *BB*; *Ground Work: Before the War* (New York: New Directions, 1984); *Ground Work II: In the Dark* (New York: New Directions, 1987).

agony and hear—what I hear now is the desolate bellowing of some ox in a ditch—madness starts up in me. The pulse of the sentence beats before and beyond all proper bounds and we no longer inhabit what we thought properly our own. (*BB*, i)

The antagonistic object is that which keeps us from becoming who we are; Duncan outlines a precise relation between fantasy and the antagonism of visual evidence here. But trauma in this passage is not simply a matter of distant events; it is our self-generated attack on parts of *ourselves*—our inadequate and poorly defended boundaries, both of the ego and of the nation—that registers the spiritual condition of war as life against death, superego versus libido. War as autopunition becomes a Dionysian source of poetry where “the pulse of the sentence beats before and beyond all proper bounds.” While the poet is courageously forthright in his abhorrence, he also claims disruption as a “form” that we cannot be outside of: “a form that our very defense corrupts.” War is an opening that poetry must take into its own orders as well; even as poetry abhors the nature of war, it must recognize its necessity. It follows that the disruption of war is everywhere connected to a shattering of boundaries in eroticism, an equation that guides Duncan in “Passages.” A poetics of permanent war comprises both internalized “strife” and released sexuality.⁴⁷

The analogy of self-shattering to war is argued as well in a poem that provides a kind of prototype for Duncan’s war poetry, “An Essay at War” (where the war in question is the Korean War, not Vietnam), placed at the beginning of *Derivations* (1968), a collection that otherwise celebrates the pleasures, rather than the destruction, of writing.⁴⁸ The poem juxtaposes scenes of domestic and erotic intimacy with flashes of war taking place at the periphery of awareness. As lovers light a fire at the end of a long day, they are suddenly reminded of the hell of war in Korea, seen as analogous to their ardor: “It is the first named incarnation of Love. We burn with it. The fire of Hell. Pain. But it is also warmth. Demonic. But it is also light. The night is all about us. A darkness within which all known things exist” (*D*, 11). Out of this darkness, figures of the Korean War appear:

⁴⁷See particularly Robert Duncan, “Man’s Fulfillment in Order and Strife,” in *Fictive Certainties* (New York: New Directions, 1985), 111–42. Paul comments: “He goes to war, bends the bow, because it is necessary to harmony and fulfillment. So the book includes his strife with Blaser over translating Nerval”; “And since the psyche exists within the social psyche (a psychic society) the artist must fight the psychic contents by admitting them in himself and in his art, by including what we know but refuse to acknowledge”; *Lost America of Love*, 258; 262.

⁴⁸Robert Duncan, *Derivations: Selected Poems, 1950–56* (London: Fulcrum Press, 1968).

Out of these invasions of Korea, what fulfillment?
 What full filling in victory? out of more war,
 these death[s] of G.I.s, carnage of men,
 of ourselves? [. . .]

But the endless dying.
 The dead by the roadside
 beautifully naked, left over
 that the old may grieve.

The scene under the 10,000 tons of bombs
 in the heat and roar of the assault,
 in the silence and rubble thereafter,

mixt for us here
 with the first stirrings of panic or despair or of longing,
 is a passion. (20)

The poem's equivalence between the carnage of war and the rising of passion certainly must qualify Duncan as poet of conscience writing against war (or, better, must explode the very idea of conscience in its erotic investments). Still, the equation is clear: there is more than a mere analogy between restorative sexual violence and the real deaths of war: "It is in the air. / Everywhere. The war is in the air. / The great self-contained war / is there. that we call love" (21). *Lost America*, bogged down in the quagmire of Asian wars, is celebrated, not mourned, as the source of generative sexuality: "The fire was the war. / We said burn with it. We said / surrender all that we value to it, / to the burning . to the war / of words, of the senses" (22). Love has become a register of destruction.⁴⁹

In 1968, when I first encountered Duncan's war poetry, I was in the last year of my student deferment at Berkeley and would soon be eligible for the draft. While the rhetorical violence of Duncan's poetry resonated profoundly with the collective state of mind of the culture I was in, it was in no sense possible to sublimate its relation to the object—the body of the male conscript or dead Asian—into poetry's production of cosmic, life-affirming desire. I possessed such a body that might be consumed, or might consume another's. The war for me was not primarily a spiritual crisis, a Blakean contest between the emanations of America

⁴⁹The object of love in Duncan's poetry is male. There is not space here to develop the implications of the gender of object choice here. Paul's reading registers Duncan's preference as "homoeros" alternately affirming its centrality to his poetics of love and seeing it as a kind of obstacle. On *Roots and Branches*, for instance, Paul writes: "The initial poems are alive with desire, point back to the green world of *The Opening of the Field*, yet bear the uncomfortable burden of homoeros"; 239.

and Asia. Such a sublation, however, is exactly what is performed in Paul's reading of Duncan, leading to speculation about the nature (and gender) of the abject in postmodern poetry. While in my reading Duncan is both made subject to and perpetuates the violence of postwar America, his work registers in Paul's account as a supreme defense of poetic truth against destructive history. In the progressive argument of *The Lost America of Love*, Duncan's defense of poetry resolves the contradictions of Creeley's agonistic poetics of love and Dorn's ironized politics of history, in a totalizing synthesis that overcomes their negativity, universalizing it as the basis of poetic form.

Central to this resolution is Duncan's collapse of the opposition of "vehicle" and "tenor" in metaphor and allegory—the Emersonian correspondences that guides Paul's reading—in favor of a universal metaphoricity, the holistic self-evidence of *muthologos*, or mythic speech (akin to Emerson's positing of the proximity of Native American language to nature).⁵⁰ As a speech act, *muthologos* is a performance of both plenitude and rupture; as Ernst Cassirer noted, in a work that surely influenced Duncan's poetics, mythic speech arises in a condition of fear and stabilizes in immediate affect:

Mythical thinking . . . comes to rest in the immediate experience; the sensible present is so great that everything else dwindles before it. For a person whose apprehension is under the spell of this mythico-religious attitude, it is as though the whole world were simply annihilated; the immediate content . . . so completely fills his consciousness that nothing else can exist beside and apart from it.⁵¹

The key terms of this passage are "annihilation" and "immediacy"; *muthologos* identifies an immediate stability of word or image with the fear of universal destruction. Cassirer goes on to develop a theory of language based in the relation to the unknown: after the shock of encounter with "the immediate exigency" that demands a response in language:

The word, like a god or a demon, confronts man not as a creation of his own, but as something existent in its own right As soon as the spark has jumped across, as soon as the tension and emotion of the moment has found its discharge in the word or the mythical image . . . the inner excitement which was a mere subjective state has vanished, and has been resolved into the objective form of myth or of speech. And now an ever-progressive objectification can begin. (36)

⁵⁰Duncan's resolutely Emersonian essay *The Truth and Life of Myth* concludes with a celebration of metaphor as the poetic basis for the soul's unfolding. The text of Duncan's essay itself could be described as a continuously elaborated metaphor for poetic truth.

⁵¹Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, (New York: Harper, 1946), 33. Duncan cites the second volume of Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* as an epigraph to *Truth and Life of Myth*, indicating Cassirer's importance for his thinking about myth.

A progressive objectification—of fear into language—leads to a mythical “field of force”: “an atmosphere of potency which permeates everything, and which may appear in concentrated form in certain extraordinary objects . . . or persons” (63). The central features of Duncan’s poetics—open form, *muthologos*, the poet as “mage”—are anticipated here. As well, there is a constitutive opposition between the mythic and the rational in Cassirer that is reflected in an obsessive need, in Duncan’s work, for the constant rationalization of his poetics in the face of their relation to the unnameable—a move to rationality akin to Creeley’s turn to conscience in Oedipal crisis, but more subject to an all-encompassing drive than occasioned by the object. A conflagration between rational directives and objectification of trauma is enacted in Duncan’s work in its ubiquitous commentary on the nature of poetics as the privileged content of his poems in the face their rupture by unrepresentable content, between a truth *about* myth and the unnameable trauma *of* it.

This relation between trauma and representation in Duncan’s poetry carries over into the act of reading; his work, in other words, reproduces the equivalence of myth in the face of sublime terror as both source and effect of the poem’s directives. For Duncan, the poem re-presents the trauma of imagined destruction (in sexuality as in war) and its overcoming, transforming threat into cosmic affirmation. At the same time, the relentlessly literary register of the poetry, its constant metaphorization of itself in relation to tradition, becomes the stability and order of tradition itself, universalized in relation to a massive threat of denial. While Duncan claims a derivation from a wide range of literary masters, inviting a kind of periphrastic reading that identifies his place in tradition, his “open” form refuses containment by any one reading. In light of its seamless metaphoricity, *any* specific reference to tradition would be an act of violence, rending the seamless fabric of the poem by the destruction that first occasioned its *muthologos*. Criticism can only be a sublime (and admiring) paraphrase. Identifying with Duncan’s poetics of reading in *The H.D. Book*, while disidentifying with its threat, Paul can only try to imitate it:

A *R.D. Book*? Isn’t *The H.D. Book* a model of inquiry? Of “tribute and study”? of open criticism? Admirative, as Bachelard says. Admire first, then judge. The lesson of Duncan’s practice and of his comments on the reception of H.D.’s *Trilogy*—on the unresponsiveness . . . and easy strictures of critics like Randall Jarrell and Dudley Fitts. (171)

Admiration is linked to disapproval, suggesting the possibility of the poet's rejection of the critic; the constant threat of a breakdown of affective continuum between poet and critic makes Duncan's work an object of fascination and horror. Paul's intensely erotic identification with Duncan's poetics, in fact, begins with a fantasy of his own destruction at the hands of the poet: "His corpus [is] strewn with the bodies of critics, the 'inert mediocrities' who dominated the period of his emergence; with those . . . who objected to his 'sentimentality' and 'philosophizing'" (ibid.). The critic must believe that he himself can go beyond these normative (and normalizing) failures; he must survive the threat of destruction at the hands of the poet. This is a reciprocal moment, in that Duncan's constitutive antagonism registers the interpellated voice of the critic; as he had written:

The voices of disapproval remain, for they are part of what the poet knows and feels. Deeper, they have been incorporated into the poet's psyche, taken-to-heart. The old arguments against the cult of beauty, against Imagism, against the occult and mytho-poeic crowd in to impersonate the poet's own duality between doubt and conviction in writing. (Quoted, 172)

The poet's antagonistic relation to criticism is one of war in which ecstatic speech, both provoked by a judgment and fighting against it, must win in the end. Duncan as poet is not just the president of regulation; he will either be its omnipotent god or dead.

The only way for Paul to survive this fatal combat is to take Duncan's invitation to paraphrase as precondition for his own ecstatic, metaphorical second-order discourse. Criticism becomes a parrying of objectified threat, where the threat is the antagonistic essence of poetry. Here, the lost America has been abducted by a stranger; our only hope of its recovery is to dial 1-800-THE LOST. The love that results will be the overcoming of our originary trauma, not simply of loss but of violent abduction—if any of us survive. Such a substitution of violence for loss, of course, occurs in Duncan's biography with his mother's death at his birth (though one wonders, as with George Bataille's fabrications of his own biography, about the literariness of this fact). An avowed parricide, like Michel Foucault's two heroes of discourse and genealogy, Raymond Roussel and Pierre Rivière, Duncan descends from a violent rupture of nothing as he weaves death into his tale. Just as in Cassirer's derivation of mythic speech, this fear of annihilation is a prerequisite for the "field of ensouling" that is love's horizon in Dun-

can's "composition by field." It is this restitutive drama of the soul's unfolding that Paul must master in his reading:

A model of entering, of making another's work the ground of one's being. Reading/writing: rites of participation. "Participation is all." Ground work. . . . In an open form, itself a demonstration of this weaving—the following out of threads of association, the knottings that for him are one of the metaphors of organic proceeding, unfolding, processual form. Nets. Constellations. Catches. . . . His gathered/clustered words are catches of imagination, of cosmic music, too. (174–75)

As Duncan weaves, so reads the critic, working warp and woof into the tradition as it is being written. The difference between the poet's self-constitution and the critic's reading is, however, great. The critic, as reader of Duncan's unfolding, processual form, is at risk of disappearance; it is the deathwardness of paraphrase that drives him toward an ever greater substitution for that which, in poetry, cannot be rendered in second-order terms. As in his prior readings of Creeley and Dorn, the critic makes a discursive regularity out of a poetic schism between plenitude and trauma, being compelled to repeat the fear of annihilation as a repeated injunction to continue in the act of making. In Paul's reading, the radical alienation of the critic in an embrace of his object leads to affective plenitude:

Collage: inclusivity. His reading, memories, visions, personal and family history, dreams, kinships; history and myth; painting; Olsonian and Poundian form (as visual touchstones), Whitmanian catalog; politics, etc. . . . And the information flows. The poem demonstrates the uses of the collective unconscious, the endless generativity of texts (literary, scholarly, visual). It transfers energy. (231)

Here literariness is subjectivation, underwritten by the transference of "energy" as mana from poet to critic as consequence of the objectification of threat. The transmission is authorially guaranteed: "I do not order ye; ye will it," as Ahab said to his crew. The critic, othered by the welter of private reference, can only restore his integrity in a universal affect. It is no accident that, almost precisely in the middle of this catalogue, "politics, etc." is mentioned. That which is traumatic and undoing for the poet, named again and again in terms of historical rupture, is reconstructed by the critic as a discursive equivalence:

How intricately woven! *Passages* belongs to the entire corpus, and the entire corpus comments on it. It is not only the intricate art, the remarkable loomcraft . . . that marks this work as masterful—I am tempted to single it out as his greatest work, but then what would I say of the still greater sequence of *The Opening of the Field, Roots and Branches, Bending the Bow*, which, as ground, contributes so much to the resonance—the intensity—of *Passages*? (270)

Where Duncan names his presidents, they can only occur in reverse order in his poetry, marching to their poetic annihilation. If the Whitmanian poet is president of regulation, in Duncan's *muthologos*, omnipotence is predicated on a negativity that is inaccessible to interpretation, as a result of its traumatic origins, that is distributed everywhere in the dispersed form of "regularity" itself. In this way, the open forms of the New American Poetry, objectifying and displacing the open wounds of America in the 1950s and 1960s, reproduce, in the poet as well as in the critic, a regularized and regularizing discourse—which, like liberal society, is most closed where it appears to be most open.⁵²

Robert Duncan, in his work as well as in his reception (which is much delayed, partly due to the lack of a collected edition, and partly to a critical environment that has rejected myth criticism as a failed reaction to the New Critics, and that sees the "mythic method" as one of the worst legacies of high modernism), provides a crucial example of liberal polity. As the apotheosis of liberal authority in its mode of poetic irrationalism—in which any positivity of knowledge or belief is subtended by a universal negativity—the poet inculcates in the critic or reader, by means of a transparent lure of paraphrase underwritten by a possibility of annihilation, the specter of his own destruction. The politics of this double movement are authoritarian in the extreme. The dutiful critic or reader, such as Paul, must internalize the viral clusters of paraphrase—the instructions for reassembling a total poetics distributed throughout the spontaneous and organic form of the poem as life—in a form of deathward memorialization where the authors, as Duncan liked to say, are in eternity: "The drama of our time is the coming of all men into one fate, 'the dream of everyone, everywhere.' The fate or dream is the fate of more than mankind." The universal trauma that subtends this fate constructs a literariness that denies other histories: there is only one history, the one produced as the nonexistence of the poet's trauma, which is cited as "history" but which cannot be reproduced. In this poetry, as a result, there is no crisis, and without crisis no decision; without decision, no choice.

⁵²Paul notes this contradiction of liberal openness in his discussion of the "aperiodic" form of Duncan's work, which precisely guarantees—because it is not reducible to bounded form or paraphrase under the rubric of the "concept"—the recurrences of canonical orthodoxy. Duncan's term for the this effect, however, is "error," which the poet must undergo because it places him nearer to the truth; *Truth and Life of Myth*, 64.

The lost America of love, as a critical practice, it should by now be obvious, is a bit of an embarrassment, even as it provides a site for discerning a mechanism of literary reproduction. Paul's work would not survive the professionalization of criticism that took place in the 1980s; on this side of that institutional divide—and I mean this even as a poet—his book appears as a self-indulgent authorial romance, the work of an awestruck and intentionally provincial critic, especially in the univocity of his America. But if we return to its poetic objects as important historical evidence, we may begin to appreciate the historicity of Paul's response. Going further, I propose that the discursive regularity Paul makes out of the permanent crisis of New American poetics—ending in an appeal, in Duncan, to a poetics of immediacy and annihilation—is a salient model for the turn to poetics in the Language School, and the poetry of the next generation. With the Language School—and this is an immanent critique—there is a possibility of the reconfiguration of a literary canon as blind to history as Paul's authorial romance.⁵³ The movement in Paul's reading, in other words, from sublation of negativity to a reproduction of holistic form, may be characteristic of the more totalizing aspects of the Language School as well.⁵⁴ In saying this, I am arguing for a return to a poetics grounded in history, rather than a myth-based or language-centered "regularity in dispersion," as the prime mover for any discursive formation of "literature" that underwrites our claims to literary value. This is precisely the genealogy of "bad history" in the New Americans' poetics of love.⁵⁵

V

A lady asked me, as part of her dissertation in psychology at UC Berkeley, a question:⁵⁶ "Is there unconditional love between adults, and how have you known it?" (the question was meant to exclude the love parents feel for their children). My response was immediately to question the love I myself felt unconditionally *for* others, even as it turned out most respondents wondered whether

⁵³See Watten, "What Is Literature?"

⁵⁴Consider, for example, the poetics of total form in the book-length works of Clark Coolidge, Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, and even my own *Progress*.

⁵⁵As an anti-parallel text to Duncan's mythic method, I propose my "April 19" in *Bad History*, 80–83.

⁵⁶The question was posed by a friend, Suzanne Dove. Cf. Guido Cavalcanti, "Donna mi prega"; Ezra Pound, Canto 36; Louis Zukofsky, "A"—9.

they themselves had ever been the unconditional object of such love. Thus representing a minority of self-reflexive respondents, I wrote:

There is no unconditional love, at least between adults. C— and I were traveling in England in 1984; she was six months pregnant and we felt confident the pregnancy would not end in miscarriage this time. We had been enmeshed in a lawsuit which was soon to terminate. In England, we made a practice of mapping out driving tours and using day hikes as centerpieces for our travels. In Wales, we thought to take a short walk near the town of Llangollen, where the famous Eistedvod (choral festival) was in progress. Walking out of the town, the landscape rapidly became more exposed, very cold and windy even in June. By the time we reached the top of the hill, where there bare ruins of a castle, I felt worried there would be some misfortune that would threaten C— and the baby. We had to find shelter from the wind; it all felt desperate and heroic. We met another couple who helped us figure out the shortest way down. I took off my coat and gave it to C—; the wind was now howling and it was very cold. On the way down we met a man of about 80 years old who was traveling from his village to the choral festival. He was in a poetic reverie sitting on a bench above the town, remembering the fighting in Burma in World War II—an experience that clearly changed him for life. His life was nearly over, but ours felt as if it were just about to begin. Back in the town, we were passed by motorized houseboats on a miniature canal that runs through the town and over the nineteenth-century aqueduct to the valley beyond. We stopped in a hotel for a dinner of very good English trout, then drove 150 miles north. The day had been a minor adventure, and though I felt outside it as an observer as much as a participant, my entire sense was of great and long-lasting closeness to C— precisely because we had been through these things—and all that preceded them—separately but in company together, in confirmation of new life to come.⁵⁷

This hybrid text, or prose poem, is included as section “B” in my book-length work *Bad History*. It at first seems to represent the spheres of value—of immediacy, reflection, and decisiveness—of the New Americans even as it is set off in the unfolding sequence of the larger work by experiences that are anything but affirmations of love: the Vietnam War; the reenactment of trauma in the Gulf War; the Los Angeles riots; the premature deaths of friends due to AIDS and cancer; the death of my mother as a result of lung disease; and a series of personal experiences anything but sutured together under the aspect of love. A quick adjustment is needed to place the positivity of this section’s avowal of love within the *via negativa* of the entire work. And indeed I was asked, soon after the section was written (by a Margaret Fuller scholar, who would have more than a personal reason to ask it): “Is ‘Love’ a part of *Bad History*; and if so, how?”⁵⁸

⁵⁷Barrett Watten, “Love,” in *Bad History*, 47-49.

⁵⁸Belle Gale Chevigny, author of *The Woman and the Myth: Margaret Fuller’s Life and Writings* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994).

An easy answer would be: love is a part of *Bad History* because it offers a figure for value, “the enduring experience of life,” that is interrupted, destroyed, traumatized by the negative experience of historical events. One might go even further and say that love participates in that trauma, because it holds out an ideal of reciprocity and affective bonds that makes “bad history” identifiable as what it is. The traumatic entailments of love, for example, are evident in the Elian Gonzalez case, which transfers the rupture of national identity onto a denial of the unquestionable bonds between parent and child.⁵⁹ In order to say what “bad history” is, at any historical moment, we need some sort of idealization that would allow us to speak it—else we are voiceless subalterns in the Ethiopian desert. For better or for worse, we cannot criticize or hold politics without ideals, and in a world where there are few secular options left for such ideals, love may not be questioned. Such a positioning of love outside the trauma of history (as a concomitant to its never entirely complete secularization) is, of course, what has made it most problematic as a concept of value, and one most identified with modernism. I have brackets *that* history—of “only love endures” (Ezra Pound) and “as I love, my poetics” (Louis Zukofsky)—by showing how the New American poets modified it even as they seemed to fix it in place. The turn to “experience,” for the New Americans, is precisely where a test of love, as a form of decision, fractures the modernist apotheosis of love—even as it is recuperated, in readings like Paul’s, as a quasi-secular horizon of enduring value.

The prose poem “Love” is certainly a test of love in a decisive experience, not just a claim to an achievement of value. Rather than making an unambiguous claim—to have been the recipient of unconditional love, or to have known it in oneself—the poem distributes love in its negation: the possibility that it has not been achieved, or may fail, or that it is only conditional on that which is not love, such as fame, money, or personal need, throughout. Love, it has been said, cannot be contingent, although Viktor Shklovsky remarks somewhere that, in the winter of Petrograd in 1919, love was whomever one was sleeping next to for warmth at the time. A recipe for love would be to place two persons (imagined as of the opposite sex) in an unheated room in the Petrograd winter; the results are guaranteed: such is the embarrassment of history in the contingency of love. Yet

⁵⁹In American culture, the traumatized figure of the displaced, threatened, or abused child—from Little Eva to Elian Gonzalez—is a crucial register of the political meaning of love, as it questions the nature of social bonds against the ideal of affective ones.

it so happened that “C— and I were traveling in England in 1984; she was six months pregnant and we felt confident the pregnancy would not end in miscarriage this time.” Immediacy, it turns out, has a compelling history—even a possibly bad one if the miscarriage repeats. “We had been enmeshed in a lawsuit which was soon to terminate.” Of what relevance is a form of judgment like a lawsuit to love, or the importance of its coming to an end? Was the disposition of the lawsuit entirely separate from the determination of our love, or is its termination necessary for it to take place? Of course, there is a higher sense of the law than a lawsuit: the retroactive determination of “what will have been,” the outcome or destiny of love, now suspended at a decisive moment.

A sifting through negativity is necessary for the unfolding of the achieved condition of love, through a series of obstacles of the sort that gave the English romantics their passport to universality. We had our passports, too, and our visit to the English countryside touched on a series of romantic stones on the way to our achievement of value, or at least the seemingly not-too-difficult climb described in the book of day hikes we brought. The English romantics, it turned out, were no mean hikers: following their footsteps in Nether Stowey or by the Lakes, as one passed rapidly above the tree line to the exposed heath, brought one into a possibility of hypothermia if the weather changed abruptly, as often occurs. The achievement of value turned out to be a test, not only of our affection but of an estimation of the circumstances—and that is where things could go wrong. The timeless Eistedvod, the lyrical festival of all ages and all nations, provided an apt counterpoint to this very timely dilemma as it rapidly shrank from view. “By the time we reached the top of the hill,” a threat of universal proportions was realized, our greatest fear. Negotiating fear becomes the construction of a shared experience, but to what degree are we to generalize that effect? Were we thrown together in the Petrograd winter, and were creating—for our survival, as well as our child’s—new affective bonds? “On our way down,” as we recover from the threat, it is then that we can experience poetry in the form of the British retired soldier’s reverie—a poetry of historical trauma, curiously rhyming with Robert Creeley’s noncombatant experience in Burma in 1946—that is beginning to work its redemptive magic in us. “His life was nearly over, but ours felt as if it were just about to begin”—good, of course, for us, but not so fortunate for him, who had offered himself to us as a poetic display, trading life that has been for that which is to come. We are on grounds here that the culture has prefigured, even as we eagerly reread it; so the “motorized houseboats” of

redemptive conviviality sail by, probably with the names of the four evangelists painted on their sides. History has been so contrived that, when we arrive back down, we are greeted with a spectacle of public works projects and sustenance for the rest of the day's travels, a drive 150 miles north so as not to miss anything else.

In this reading of the poem, love is outside us and we come to know the value of our experience within it. Love is a brutal obstacle course, fending off need and killing off the "life that has been" in order to preserve the "life to come." We are a moment of social reproduction of the holy trinity of the nuclear family, safe from all threats and enjoying the rewards of the day. But I am outside it as well— "as an observer as much as a participant," and therein lies the test of love. Because it turns out that the "day's minor adventure" was a test that had been prepared in advance, to construct the love that would or would not survive it. It was one that we engaged in willingly, testing our most intimate expectations on a hostile world outside. Being outside guarantees, in other words, the knowledge of love, which is neither a simple response to a threat of loss nor the "greed," as Charles Olson put it, "that they are alive."⁶⁰ Rather, knowledge is gained at a moment of decision that is not identical to the foreknowledge of the test but that cannot be separated from it. The intersection of love with form, here the form of a day hike, gives proof to the maxim: "There is no unconditional love, at least between adults." "Love is form," as Olson famously wrote; here form is understood to be *outside*.⁶¹ This is the transformation of the New Americans' poetics of "love" in the revisionary terms of *Bad History*.

⁶⁰Charles Olson, "at the boundary of the might world. . .," in *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 330.

⁶¹Charles Olson, "I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You," in *The Maximus Poems*,