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Poetry Chorus

The Politics of Revolutionary Memory

The Community of the Left

As the Depression deepened in the early 1930s, large numbers of Americans, including both young and established writers, were increasingly drawn to the Left or to the Communist Party. There was a widespread conviction that capitalism had failed, that the old order could not be restored, and that only the most thoroughgoing social and political change could bring about social and economic justice. A number of active poets had already been writing from that perspective since the 1920s. For one thing, the much-heralded Roaring Twenties had not brought economic health to everyone. Not only agriculture but also the entire rural economy had remained depressed throughout the decade; moreover, several major industries were already in recession before the stock market crash of 1929. Especially in the South and in depressed areas in the North, working-class and labor poets, along with poets affiliated with socialism, had been writing about economic inequities for years. Subcultural traditions of protest poetry stretched back into the nineteenth century, and some of the poets in those traditions felt themselves to be not only individual voices but also participants in movements for social change.

In some cases anthologies and other collaborative work helped reinforce a sense that poets writing on public themes were not so much working to silence or dominate one another by competing to write the best poem on a given subject but were rather contributing to a common cultural enterprise. A more successful, more eloquent, or more deeply moving, poem might thereby seem less a personal triumph than a victory for the cause at issue. The sense of accomplishment could thus be partly focused on poetry's success at winning the moral
ground in a cultural struggle, in establishing that authentic literary idealization belonged to one side and not the other. Recognizing that poetry had an historically constructed authority to speak with (and for) metaphorized idealization in the culture—an authority long recognized and reinforced by both the political Right and Left—poets understood that ground to be worth the struggle.

In the decades leading up to the Great Depression, poetry anthologies sometimes show progressive social movements working to establish a plausible textual history for their key commitments and beliefs. Especially with more ambitiously historical anthologies, a considerable effort was made to draw out of older texts the semantic elements that could link them to an emerging contemporary consensus. Particularly notable is the 1916 anthology Socialism in Verse, compiled by William J. Ghent as the twelfth volume in his New Appeal Socialist Classics series. The other volumes in the series are all prose, and the texts they print—whether individually or collectively authored—are mostly contemporary and are frequently devoted to extended argument. The eleventh volume, however, The Socialist Appeal: Prose Passages Which Voice the Call for a New Social Order, is composed of recent one- to four-page editorials and excerpts from longer works and aims for a collective evocation of first principles. The final volume, on poetry, takes that impulse one step further, reaching back through the nineteenth century and beyond for evidence of explicit or implicit socialist vision. It is in the volume of poetry, crucially, that authors who were not socialists find a place; as the form of writing most fully secured as a site of idealization, poetry, it appears, can lend its passions to socialism, even if its authors would not have imagined that possible. If the project is successful, the long poetic history of protests against social injustice and visions of utopian futures will seem to culminate in the Socialist Party’s present aims. Collectively, the poems offer an historical ground for current work and aspirations.

What is equally interesting about the anthology, however, is its explicit reflection on the work of rearticulation that such a project entails. A series of notes at the back of the book makes clear that the reason some of the texts are merely excerpts is that only those passages that can contribute to an authentic socialism are printed. When an author’s beliefs leaned in other directions, that too is made clear rather than hidden. Lord Byron is thus credited with having “many quotable passages in celebration of liberty and in denunciation of tyrants,” but Ghent adds that “his notion of tyranny did not go beyond the unregulated power of kings and dictators” (58). One would not, therefore, look to Byron for poems about how class relations are played out in the workplace. Similarly, he tells us that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow “wrote some notable verse in behalf of freedom and against slavery, but either had no knowledge of, or no sympathy with, the cause of the workers” (60). Thirteen years later, in the midst of the hourglass economy of the 1920s and on the eve of the stock market crash, Marcus Graham’s more ambitious historical collection, An Anthology of Revolutionary Poetry, brings that project to the present day, even going so far as to include T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” and Ezra Pound’s “Commission.” In effect, Eliot and Pound are allowed to testify to historical conditions that they would interpret rather differently. Such an anthology is an effort to construct a collective form of testimony so powerful, even inexorable, that it can take up and transform some of the texts it includes. The anthologies themselves, however, demonstrate that the common threads they want to emphasize will not quite be self-evident to all readers of poetry; they are devoted not simply to reporting the existence of a progressive and revolutionary tradition but also to creating one—by rereading history and its present implications—and thus creating a usable past that poets and readers of poetry can identify with thereafter.

Collections of contemporary poetry and song grouped around a more focused issue or set of cultural commitments did, however, not only reflect and define but also help call into being shared social and literary aims. A list of such texts in the modern period, some still famous, some nearly forgotten, might begin with the IWW’s Songs of the Workers, first issued in 1909, and move on through Countee Cullen’s celebrated Harlem Renaissance anthology Caroling Dusk (1927) and the revolutionary poetry collection We Gather Strength (1933). Collections on specific causes or problems perhaps best foreshadow the kind of multivocal dialogue and consensus one finds in the 1930s. Of these, the most suggestive may be Lucia Trent and Ralph Cheyney’s America Arraigned, a collection honoring Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti and published in 1928, the year after they were executed for robbery and murder in Massachusetts. Although many were persuaded they had been framed, they were nonetheless convicted in 1921; it was a victory not only for reactionary politics but also for American xenophobia, since the men were immigrant anarchists. By the time they were executed, the case had radicalized large numbers of Americans, many of whom came to believe that the country’s institutions were hopelessly corrupt and thus impossible to reform by ordinary means. Some sixty poets contributed pieces to the anthology, which followed The Sacco-Vanzetti Anthology of Verse, a pamphlet anthology published by Henry Harrison a year earlier. Tied carefully to the development of the case, America Arraigned is divided into three sections: “Before Governor Fuller and His Advisory Commission Refused to Interfere,” “After Intercission Was Refused but Before the Crucifixion,” and “After the Crucifixion.” Purchasing the collection was also a political act, since profits went to defray the expenses of the Sacco-Vanzetti Relief Committee.
With the onset of the Great Depression the following year and the rise of a genuine mass movement on the Left, these traditions—examples of which we have seen here and in the previous chapters—received more than a new or expanded life, though they received those as well. Within a few years, however, the sense of a common political and poetic project no longer had to be cobbled together out of a sometimes resistant history; it was everywhere apparent. In some cases, to be sure, a new and different life was granted poets who now suddenly had a wider national audience. Some poets—such as Henry George Weiss—saw their work of the 1920s reprinted and given fresh meanings and new cultural purpose; in effect, some of the political poetry of the 1920s became new protest poetry of the 1930s when it was reissued in the midst of the Depression. But the changes in the practice and the social meaning of poetry went much deeper than that.

For a brief moment in American literary history, writing poetry became a credible form of revolutionary action. Reading poetry, in turn, became a way of positioning one’s self in relation to the possibility of basic social change. Earlier, the IWW’s poems set to music had been among the IWW’s most successful recruitment devices. Now, to read a poem like Langston Hughes’s “Let America Be America Again” was to find more than an echo of one’s own sense of cultural crisis and necessity. It was to find a place to stand ideologically, a concise discursive perspective on America’s history and engagement with its contemporary culture. It was also to find a voice one could temporarily take up as one’s own. Poetry at once gave people radical critique and visionary aspiration, and it did so in language fit for the speaking voice. It strengthened the beliefs of those already radicalized and helped to persuade some who were not yet decided. It was thus a notable force in articulating and cementing what was a significant cultural and political shift toward the Left. To write poetry under these conditions of readership was therefore to ask not only what one wanted to say but also what other people wanted to read; the sense of audience was pressing, immediate. A revolutionary poem in a magazine or newspaper could be taken up and used by an audience only days or weeks after it was written. Thus when Angelo Herndon, a black communist unconstitutionally charged with “attempting to incite insurrection” for helping to organize a Georgia hunger march, was released on bail in 1934, poems celebrating his August 7 arrival in New York were written and published within days. Alfred Hayes’s “Welcome to Angelo Herndon” appeared in the Daily Worker on August 9; Michael Blankfort’s “Angelo Herndon’s Ball” was published in the same newspaper on August 15; and Edwin Rolfe’s “Homecoming” was in the August 21 issue of New Masses. When such poems offered readers politically committed speaking voices with which they could identify, moreover, the poems were in a sense a gift to prospective readers, a text whose authorship was inherently transferable. To publish a poem that might prove politically persuasive was, in effect, to ask readers to live by way of these words as if they were their own.

The sense of rapid use—of poetry written to play an immediate role in public life—was not unique to the Depression; it hearkened back to the abolitionist poetry of the nineteenth century and to broadside poems issued in the United States and in Europe over a period of centuries. For contemporary readers it may recall some of the poetry read at antiwar rallies in the 1960s. Part of what distinguishes this phenomenon in the modern period are simply the means of circulation, the possibility of mass participation in the reading of poetry, and poetry’s empowering integration with a wide range of other cultural activities. Long considered by academics a debased form of publication, mass circulation newspapers from the Appeal to Reason to the New York Call and the Daily Worker played a key role here. Given poetry’s history of identification with transcendentalizing (or at least transhistorical) idealization, there is, of course, a real tension built into its publication in the transitory medium of print. Newspapers themselves sometimes marked poetry’s difference by placing it in a special box, but that difference was also complicated by poetry’s multiple relations with other items in the paper. When the Daily Worker put poems on its features page—along with letters to the editor, notices of events, and recipes—poetry’s difference did not prevent it from being seen as an object designed for practical use in everyday life. For poets publishing in newspapers these ambiguities could be appealing rather than troubling. Mass readership reinforced the shift in emphasis from the production to the consumption of poems, shifting ownership from author to audience. What mattered to the audience, moreover, was not an effort to capture what an author meant but to take responsibility for how poems could change their own lives. Publishing poems in newspapers suggested not so much that poems were utterly expendable and transitory—the same poems, after all, might later be collected in books—but rather that their claims to transhistorical values mattered only if they were taken up in people’s daily lives. For poets, therefore, a wide popular readership demonstrated that poetry mattered; compromising its elite status was a gain, not a loss. The mass audience for poetry in the Depression was, paradoxically, one of the triumphs of a time of widespread suffering.

To begin to understand what it meant to be a poet on the Left in the Depression, it is necessary to extend that recognition to the whole cultural field and accept it as a general paradox that typifies life in that period. Hand in hand with hunger and unemployment and the many difficulties of everyday life went
reviewers failed to ask what particular poets were contributing to the common culture of the period. Indeed there was no lack of intense disagreement about the strengths and weaknesses and class commitments of 1930s political poetry. But there was also an underlying and omnipresent sense of a common mission that pervaded much of the conversation about poetry during the height of the Depression.

If the postwar values of the English profession have tended primarily to honor one poetic epistemology—that of expressive subjectivity—the largely forgotten political poetry of the 1930s went in another direction. One of the recurrent issues in 1930s poetry is the necessity of disavowing certain forms of subjectivity. “To welcome multitudes—the miracle of deeds/performing in unison,” Rolfe wrote in the opening lines of his 1936 To My Contemporaries, “the mind must first renounce the fiction of the self.” It was as if, to clear the ground in poetry for a different kind of agency, one less self-absorbed and more directed toward the social text, it was in poetry itself that the ego had to be challenged. That is not to say that all forms of subjectivity were abandoned; both poetry and fiction became important sites for narratives of awakening political awareness and narratives of individual transformation.

The shift in the epistemology of composition meant more than the adoption of new subject matter, though. Poetry became a form of social conversation and a way of participating in collaborative political action. Poetry was thus in the immediate materiality of its signs dialogic—engaged in a continuing dialogue both with other poetry and with the other discourses and institutions of its day. Adapting Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism, which he used to speak of multiple ideolcets in novels, helps us see the play of difference in a poetic discourse we have long taken to be unproblematically monologic. Even now, to read the political poetry of that period is potentially to recognize the continual play of similarity and difference with other contemporary poems.

The points of comparison are most obviously thematic, rhetorical, and metaphoric—how poets represent the unemployed or the owners of industry, how they give voice to the period’s suffering or its hope for revolutionary change—but the presence of potential dialogic relations extends also to formal choices and to the informing sense of poetic function and the vocation of poetry. There is thus a continual dialogue taking place in the effort both to describe social conditions and to invent ways for poetry to intervene in them. One relatively minor but indicative textual sign of changing notions of poetry’s social role and its relation to individual expression is the willingness many poets displayed to include political slogans in their work, sometimes printing
them like banner headlines in capital letters. As we will see in the next chapter, this would become much more common after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, but it begins in the first half of the decade.

This intertextual social conversation obviously cannot confine itself to poems in their entirety, though it certainly operates at that level as well. The pattern of verbal echoes, reinforcements, extensions, and disputes actually permeates poems at the level of individual stanzas, lines, images, and narrative units. To shut one's ears to that conversation is to silence the material conditions of poetry in that time. To hear that conversation is to witness poems in a constant state of disassemblage and reassemblage, as pieces of other poems are woven into any given text and pieces of every text are disseminated into related texts and discourses as we read. Moreover, these are not fixed intertextual structures—references and allusions to be identified, certified, and annotated—but potential relations to be effected in the work of reading. Part of the cultural work of reading—the semiotics of reading—was to confirm a poem's participation in the mass movement of the Left by enacting it. To read 1930s political poetry is thus in part to personify—to act out in one's person—a version of the intertextuality of that time. A proper reader of this poetry comes to occupy the cultural field in somewhat the same way the poetry itself did.

This kind of reading requires that we give up at least temporarily the strong bias toward thinking only in terms of self-sufficient, formally contained poems. There are many formally coherent and metaphorically inventive political poems from the 1930s and no lack of poems possessing a relative formal autonomy that contributed to their success, but that is not the only historically relevant way to read them. For some decades the academy has so fetishized its own investment in individual poems that it has ignored the possibility that the poem as an object has meant different things to different audiences at various moments in history. In the case of poems published as songbook lyrics, for example, it was considered quite appropriate to revise them to fit new political functions. Peter Glazer has pointed out to me that the Abraham Lincoln Brigade song about the February 1937 battle of Jarama was revised repeatedly to move it from an account of a disastrous loss to a moral victory. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that people were always as invested in finished, sacralized, independent poems as we are. It is thus potentially quite disabling to write literary history under the sign of a transcendentalized and ahistorical notion of poetic form, for that limits us to our own interested notion of what we want poems to be and blocks any effort, however problematic, to try to understand what poems meant to people in their own time. At least in the 1930s, the many hundreds of poems taking up the major social and political issues of the moment also participate in the cultural dialogue that supports, complicates, extends, or resists what were the increasingly influential Left perspectives on current conditions. That dialogue can operate at all discursive levels, not just those dependent on an overarching sense of form.

Reading poems this way does mean coming to value their relational power and effectivity. It also means valuing individual lines and images for their capacity to reinforce or differ from the existing patterns in the discursive field. This does not, however, mean that we have to collapse poetry and rhetoric, for the special social functions attributed to poetry can operate through the echoing and counterpointing of lines and images as readily as they can through entire poems. Yet we do have to begin to admire poems for their capacity to participate in history, not for their supposed capacity to transcend it. At that point something like a political aesthetic of the poetic fragment becomes possible.

Of course poetry was only part of the dialogic cultural conversation taking place at the time. Narratives of economic injustice and political conversion were so prevalent in fiction, journalism, and critical analysis that poetry could easily rely for its contextual intelligibility not only on preexisting political images in its own genre but also on a growing body of related texts in the surrounding culture. Revolutionary poetry was part of a political and cultural movement that touched every element of daily life. But poetry also had a degree of relative autonomy and a distinct, though not exclusive, series of social functions. It played a variety of social roles, each partially shared and in competition with other discourses embedded in a variety of social institutions. Poets thus saw themselves as having a distinctive though contested mission, and we have good reason to try to recover some approximation of that mission if we want to keep that portion of our past alive in our cultural memory.

Tillie Olsen's Sweat Shop Poem

One of the more interesting changes brought about by the culture's redefinition of poetry's mission was in the concept of authorship, a corollary to the shift away from an emphasis on self-expressive subjectivity. Many poets were concerned about establishing their careers, getting reviewed, and selling books, though even these conventional personal interests sometimes had a different inflection. Reviews potentially represented not just a source of personal pride but a confirmation that the poetry was meeting the social needs it was written to serve. Sales too could confirm that an audience was being reached. That Sol
Funaroff’s 1938 collection of poems The Spider and the Clock could sell five thousand copies at a dollar each—when money was still not easy to come by—says a great deal about the importance people placed on radical poetry during the Depression. There were, moreover, a number of poets who for years remained deeply committed to writing and publishing poetry without much caring about their careers or their fame as poets. Poetry was a major part of their engagement with the world, a way of intervening in history, a way of altering the hierarchization of values in the United States, but not primarily a means of promoting their personal prestige. Among others, Joe Freeman and Mike Gold, both of whom established reputations on the Left in the 1920s, wrote poetry more as a form of political action than as a mechanism for personal advancement.

It was, however, the worker’s correspondence poem of the 1930s, the found poem of that era, that most clearly displaced notions of authorship and originality. In 1927 Gold published a poem, he was pleased to note, drawn entirely from Vanzetti’s published speeches and letters. In the 1930s a number of poets, including Gold and Freeman, published poems based on workers’ correspondence, and some wrote poems of their own that imitated workers’ letters. In most cases the original sources for these poems have not survived, though it is clear the level of intervention and manipulation varied. Some poets no doubt wrote original poems and called them workers’ correspondence. Others clearly did turn workers’ letters into poems, though with different degrees of revision.

Tillie Olsen, who was then writing under her maiden name, Lerner, however, wrote a poem based on a letter that had been published in the January 9, 1934, issue of New Masses, so in this case, uncommonly, both texts are available. New Masses published the letter under the heading “Where the Sun Spends the Winter,” a version of the slogan adopted by a Texas Chamber of Commerce as the motto for a tourist campaign. The letter describes the impossible lives of four women who survive by hand embroidering children’s dresses for a few pennies each. The author of the letter, Felipe Ibarro, may well have been a journalist or a social worker or perhaps simply an activist, so the letter is not the direct testimony of the workers described but reported testimony that is already self-consciously rhetorical. Nonetheless, it offers one interesting version of this distinctive 1930s genre. It is worth comparing the opening paragraphs of the letter with the first three stanzas of the poem. Here is the opening of the letter:

I want the women of New York, Chicago and Boston who buy at Macy’s, Wannamaker’s, Gimbel’s and Marshall Field to know that when they buy embroidered children’s dresses labeled ‘hand made’ they are getting dresses made in San Antonio, Texas, by women and girls with trembling fingers and broken backs.

These are bloody facts and I know, because I’ve spoken to the women who make them. Catalina Rodriguez is a 24-year-old Mexican girl but she looks like 12. She’s in the last stages of consumption and works from six in the morning till midnight. She says she never makes more than three dollars a week. I don’t wonder any more why in our city with a population of 250,000 the Board of Health has registered 8,000 professional “daughters of joy” and in addition, about 2,000 Mujeres Alegres (happy women), who are not registered and sell themselves for as little as five cents.

Here are the opening stanzas of the poem:

i want you women up north to know
how those dainty children’s dresses you buy
at macy’s, wannamaker’s, gimbel’s, marshall fields,
are dyed in blood, are stitched in wasting flesh,
down in San Antonio, “where sunshine spends the winter.”

I want you women up north to see
the obsequious smile, the salesladies trill
“exquisite work, madame, exquisite pleats”
vanish into a bloated face, ordering more dresses,
gouging the wages down,
dissolve into maria, ambrosia, catalina,
stitching these dresses from dawn to night,
in blood, in wasting flesh.

Catalina Rodriguez, 24,
body shrivelled to a child’s at twelve,
catalina rodriguez, last stages of consumption,
works for three dollars a week from dawn to midnight.
A fog of pain thickens over her skull, the parching heat
breaks over her body.
and the bright red blood embroiders the floor of her room.
White rain stitching the night, the bourgeois poet would say,
white gulls of hands, darting, veering,
white lightning, threading the clouds,
this is the exquisite dance of her hands over the cloth,
and her cough, gay, quick, staccato,
like skeleton’s bones clattering.
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is appropriate accompaniment for the esthetic dance
of her fingers
and the tremulo, tremulo when the hands tremble with pain.
Three dollars a week,
two fifty-five,
seventy cents a week,
no wonder two thousands eight hundred ladies of joy
are spending the winter with the sun after he goes down . . .

Olsen works with Ibarro's letter to draw out its drama and intensify the metaphorical power of the suffering it recounts. The title, "I Want You Women Up North to Know," drawn from the letter, serves as a refrain line that becomes a paradigm for North/South relations and for those who benefit, often indifferently and sometimes in ignorance, from economic exploitation. Olsen uses her own metaphors as well as Ibarro's, but her poem remains nonetheless an inventive extension of the original letter. Keeping true to Ibarro's wish to have women up north understand the economic and social relations that are hidden within the clothing they buy, Olsen adds a passage describing a department store where the children's dresses are sold. Notably, however, the poem's most explicit challenge—a challenge built into the original letter—is not to the businessmen who hire the dressmakers or to the department store owners who sell them but to the consumers who buy them and thus fuel the entire set of transactions. Olsen is not alone in focusing on how ordinary people's actions help sustain economic exploitation—Kenneth Fearing, for example, often satirizes the way people's illusions reinforce the ideology of the marketplace—but attacks on industrialists were certainly more common during the period.

The primary change from Ibarro's text to Olsen's, as with most poems based on worker correspondence, is the generic shift itself; the move from prose to poetry. This is a shift Olsen embraces, but with uneasiness, as her effort to emulate (and thereby critique) a bourgeois poet's lyrical evocation of Catalina Rodríguez's dying efforts at embroidery suggests: "White rain stitching the night, the bourgeois poet would say. White gulls of hands, darning." As Constance Coiner points out in her reading of the poem, Olsen moves "abruptly from a parody of traditional lyrical poetry, which, in her view would ignore or distance the reader from the plight of these exploited workers, to prosaically announcing their low wages and their only available alternative for employment, prostitution." But Olsen's poem is itself, as Coiner demonstrates, "at points sensitive to the richness and rhythm of language. The free verse form and the repetition of words and phrases may represent a debt to Whitman, while a bold central metaphor transforms the women into the clothing they embroider—that is, into commodities" (163). Yet Olsen cannot actually cast out the imagined bourgeois poet's literariness without casting out her own as well. She would reject an obfuscating metaphoricity that substitutes fantasies of birds on the wing for hand movements that are actually painful. Yet one could also take the line as celebrating a dept beauty in the midst of suffering. The poem in short puts forward an argumentative dichotomy which the poem itself simultaneously destabilizes and undermines, making the reader examine his or her own relationship to the moral and political implications of figurative language.

Where Coiner and I differ is in how much weight we are finally willing to place on the poem's reflective self-consciousness about language and about the final effect of its unwavering critique of border capitalism. Coiner's conclusion lays out her doubts:

While the text succeeds in its intention to force us to confront the agony and injustice of these garment workers' lives, it is also unsettling because it pre-empts our emotional and moral responses. It bludgeons us, its exhortatory language announcing a distrust that the reader will respond appropriately to the garment workers' suffering. The language announces itself, too, as "movement" discourse, which in practice turns back on itself rather than to a general audience—that is, the already converted speak to the already converted in the special discourse of converts. Because those who might have been persuaded are, in effect, excluded by this discourse, the poem's intention is undercut. (163)

Yet the audience that Olsen has her doubts about—as the poem makes clear—is the audience of consumers. Will upper-middle-class consumers stop buying these dresses? Almost certainly not. The expectation that she cannot reach those consumers is built into the poem's adoption of a revolutionary solution. But the revolutionary context of the poem is not so much armed insurrection as it is the more utopian versions of trade unionism at work in the country just as Olsen was writing. As Coiner points out, "as Olsen began her writing career, workers started pouring into the available unions... Their strength came in sheer numbers, and those numbers came from other workers willing to join the picket in solidarity" (160). The poem urges this sort of solidarity on sympathetic readers, including workers themselves, and does not seek a transformed upper-middle class. Whether one admires the results is partly a matter of taste, politics, class identification, and literary training. One may be hailed or alienated by the poem's rhetoric and by the general rhetoric of 1930s revolutionary poetry; in the case of either response, it is not a matter that
can be objectively resolved, despite the temptation to turn our preferences into transcendent values.

Yet the choice is not between aesthetics and politics; more often it is a matter of how the poem negotiates the relationship between aesthetics and politics. More effective political poems are often aesthetically appealing. Aesthetics thus plays a major role in judging political poetry. The problem in the way people formulate the problem is twofold: first, they fail to admit that one set of coherent aesthetic criteria will not even encompass the variations within canonical modernism, let alone the whole range of poems recovered in recent decades; second, they fail to recognize that understanding and evaluating noncanonical poems often requires a partly new and unfamiliar aesthetic vocabulary.

As both this chapter and the next one make clear, an aesthetic of the differential field is one of the two radical departures I am proposing. One may value a poem (or a passage from a poem) because of its contribution to a wider field of discourse, because of the way it complicates or enhances a larger literary and historical dialogue. The second departure from professional literary studies calls for evaluations based on a poem’s negotiations between aesthetics and history. This requires treating aesthetics and history as interdependent rather than mutually exclusive categories. And finally I am recommending that we value poems for the way they juxtapose or negotiate the relations between literary and nonliterary language. That means valuing not only explicitly lyrical language but also language that seems nonmetaphoric, prosaic, or polemical.

This revisionary set of criteria also incorporates a series of more familiar concerns. In evaluating political poetry one looks for a certain wit and rhetorical inventiveness in engaging with an historical context. One expects a political poem valued in its entirety to master a field of contesting social and ideological forces. One looks as well for miraculous compression, as in Hughes’s “Christ in Alabama.” A poem can often render a complex historical problem more tellingly than any other form of discourse. As a result, politically and historically focused poems do not only offer compelling testimony; they are also often among the best places to think through our relationship to both current events and long-term historical memory.

For all these reasons I find Olsen’s poem aesthetically and politically successful. The concise specificity of its account of exploited labor is persuasive and moving. The continuing existence of such sweatshops around the world nearly seventy years later gives the poem continuing and long-term historical relevance. The poem’s final homage to the Russian revolution may seem dated, but its detailed story of the garment industry is as current as yesterday’s news. A single witness’s testimony about four women in one 1930s city becomes synec-

dochic in four senses: these workers become representatives of their class, their suffering becomes emblematic of a whole range of values the culture should either resist or espouse, their time becomes a figure for economic inequities of long duration, and readers now as then are challenged about their complicity in an economic system and urged to reposition themselves within solidarity. The experience of working people thereby becomes a fitting ground for all the ideological investments the culture makes in literariness, particularly in poetry. Finally, to make poetry out of working-class experience, to return to working people their own narratives (or narratives about them) in poetic form, is explicitly to overturn much of the class prejudice inherent in the culture’s hierarchal view of aesthetic value.

In all of this Olsen is effectively Ibarro’s agent in the domain of literariness. The first person in the title of Olsen’s poem is largely an extension of Ibarro’s, even though Olsen amplifies what she feels we should know. Olsen thus draws out the structural implications of the underpaid work these women do and of the religious faith that helps keep them positioned as they are. Ibarro reports Ambrosa Espinoza’s struggle to “pay rent for her shack, pay insurance, support the Catholic Church and feed herself.” Olsen intensifies the ironies and adds an explicit antireligious commentary:

but the pennies to keep god incarnate, from ambrosa, and the pennies to keep the priest in wine, from ambrosa, ambrosa clothes god and priest with hand-made children’s dresses.

Olsen also offers a more explicit revolutionary message. Espinoza’s cripple brother, who lies “on a mattress of rags” and “dreams of another world” does not quite know that an alternative world “was brought to earth in 1917 in Russia, by workers like him.” Except for a slight rearrangement of the words in the first line, however, the last stanza (with its revolutionary promise) is quoted directly from Ibarro’s letter:

Women up north, I want you to know,
I tell you this can’t last forever.

I swear it won’t.

Revolution’s Collective Voice

Such motives animate much of the political poetry of the 1930s, which often focuses on economic hardship and revolutionary change, on general socia
conditions rather than private experience. Even when individual experience is recounted, it is often recounted because of its representative character, its simultaneous enabling and determination by current history. With individual poets each offering alternative versions of life in the Depression and with poets hearing one another’s work at group poetry readings and reading each other’s work in books and magazines, it is not difficult to see how one is led not merely to read comparatively but to read chorally, to see these poems not as entries in a competition but as mutually responsive contributions to an emerging revolutionary consensus. That increases the impact of the poems, at least for those reading them as part of a movement.

To read or write a 1930s political poem properly, then, is to be continually hailed by other voices. To give some sense of what that might be like, I would like to present a five-part poetry chorus assembled out of fragmentary quotations taken from poetry of the period. This collation of fragments gives particular emphasis to the years 1929–1936, which had the strongest sense of a common revolutionary social mission, but the arrangement is conceptual not chronological. (After 1936 the rhetoric of revolution receded into the background as both the Communist International and the American Communist Party committed themselves to a broad united front coalition to defeat fascism. In the summer of 1936, a new choral subject, the Spanish Civil War, began to occupy the international Left.) The first and third sections, “The City” and “The Farm,” focus on descriptions of social conditions in the two major social environments of the depression. The second section, “North and South: The Ghetto and the Lynching Tree,” gives a glimpse of the dialogue about race among white and black poets that peaked in the 1930s. The fourth section, “Capital,” gathers a few of the many passages of economic and social commentary and analysis that recur in 1930s poetry. The fifth and final section, “Revolution,” evokes the figurative and political resolution that lies explicitly or implicitly behind much of the protest literature of the depression. Although the emphasis here is on a discursive formation rather than on individual achievement, the names of the authors are noted in parenthesis, so that readers can have a sense of authorial participation in the continuing dialogue of the time:

I

The City

This is the sixth winter.
This is the season of death
when lungs contract and the breath of homeless men
freezes on restaurant window-panes. (Edwin Rolfe)

See the set faces hungrier than rodents. In the Ford towns
They shrivel. Their fathers accept tear gas and blackjacks.
When they sleep, whimper. Bad sleep for us all.
Their mouths work, supposing food. (Genevieve Taggard)

We have grown used to nervous landscapes, chimney-broken horizons,
and the sun dying between tenements (Richard Wright)
The hungry digging the wild roots
From hillsides (Ruth Lechlitner), the parched young.
The old man rooting in waste-heaps, the family rotting
In the flat, before eviction (Stephen Vincent Benêt);
There are mice in the granary, rats running in the roof-beams, ants
Chewing at the foundations.
Death-beetles tick under the wall-paper, punctuate the evening quiet
Of families gathered at home. (James Neugass)

This is the season when rents go up.
Men die, and their dying is casual, (Rolfe)
deep in the gangrened basements
Where Whitman’s America
Aches, to be born (Mike Gold)

Out there on the ruin of Kansas . . .
Downtown in the ruins called Denver (H. H. Lewis)
The crowds twisting over the maimed cement;
the unemployed with the bars of the L in their eyes (Ben Maddow)
the whimpering
stragglers at backdoors, the scratchy beggars
in the streets (Robert Gessner)
the ghosts in the burning city of our times (Benêt)

Skeletons cast on a shore devoted to business (Etore Rella)
Those heaps of plaster in the condemned house,
where the evicted slept last week;
the nailed doors. (Maddow)

The cardiac baby cries on the highest floor;
the relief potatoes boiled and blue
served on oilcloth. (Maddow)

You see the dead face peering from your shoes;
the eggs at Thompson’s are the dead man’s eyes. (Rolfe)
Revolutionary Memory

‘Both rich and poor, my friends, must sacrifice,’ reechoes,
murmuring, through hospitals, death-cells. (Kenneth Fearing)

Maggots and darkness will attend the alibi. (Fearing)

II

North and South:
The Ghetto and the Lynching Tree

Ah wukked mah time an overtime
Ah wukked mah time an too much time. (Sol Funaroff)
I am a Negro:
Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa. (Langston Hughes)
I am the woman with the black black skin
I am the laughing woman with the black black face
I am living in the cellars and in every crowded place
I am toiling just to eat
In the cold and in the heat
And I laugh
I am the laughing woman who’s forgotten how to weep
I am the laughing woman who’s afraid to go to sleep (Angelina Weld Grimké)

Now I climb death’s tree. (Charles Henri Ford)
The moon lies like a tombstone in the sky,
Three black men sway upon a lonely hill. (Lucia Trent)
The bloodhounds look like sad old judges
In a strange court. They point their noses
At the Negro jerking in the tight noose;
His feet spread crow-like above these
Honorable men who laugh as he chokes. (Kenneth Patchen)
And little lads, Lynchers that were to be,
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee. (Claude McKay)

The forest falls, the stream runs dry,
the tree rots visibly to the ground;
nothing remains but sixteen black
bodies against a blood-red sky. (Edwin Rolfe)

Nine dark boys spread their breasts against Alabama,
schooled in the cells, fathered by want. (Muriel Rukeyser)
They are ours; we claim them and we claim

what they have suffered, upon our backs is laid
the stone of their dark days, and we have made
their name our name. (A. B. Magil)

... I know that one of my hands
Is black, and one white. (Patchen)
I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars . . .
I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine. (Langston Hughes)
“We gonna clean out dis brushwood round here soon,
Plant de white-oak and de black-oak side by side.” (Sterling A. Brown)

And slowly rises the river,
seething, chocolate-brown;
stealthily drifts on its current,
sweeping, with many a shiver,
Over the cottonweeds, roosting on sandbanks, spectrally grey and surprising;
Writhing their branches to the sky;—
Slowly the black tide is rising. (John Gould Fletcher)

III

The Farm

Outcries of unrest in a dream (Sol Funaroff)
pale children bowing in beerfields (Joseph Kalar)
And the men with bared feet in the grass:
their tired, heavy bodies hug the earth (Funaroff)

Tom’s half-gone Ford
Stopped in the barn-yard middle. There the hens
Fluffed dust and slept beneath it. Desolation
Sat busy in the yard somewhere. The cows stamped on
Inside the barn with caking heavy udders (Taggard)

The washtub cattle stagger and die of drought (Bené)
Drought walks in the furrows
And the young corn withers (Leclitner)
Their farmer scrapes with his hoe the uniform heaven: drought (Maddow)

Last week from black pasturage the cattle stooped to
rasp the last mud (Maddow)
They sold the calf. That fall the bank took over (Taggard)