1

Modern Poems
We Have Wanted to Forget

A Poetry Dossier

It is important to begin by remarking what a wealth of "beginnings" there are
in the various stories that can be told about modern poetry and about its imme-
diate predecessors. Some of these beginnings are moments of cultural and sty-
listic change; others are nodal points, moments when diverse cultural impulses
coalesce in poetry of particular force; and finally some of these beginnings are
moments of forgetfulness and loss, even instances of active repression, when
vital poetic traditions have been suppressed so that more selective histories can
be retold thereafter. Even in the selective histories that have served the domi-
nant culture—the "we" of my title—it has been impossible to ignore the fact
that modern poetry kept reinventing itself repeatedly and thus began again itself
many times.

For much of this century, we have known that poetry is a palimpsest of multi-
ple beginnings, that it is layered with earlier poems, with the memory of earlier
poems and with echoes of poems forgotten that speak through us now unawares.
Both the institutions that promote poetry and the multiple audiences for poetry
are palimpsests as well—layered with traces of what is treasured and reviled,
commemorated and rejected, witnessed and repressed. The space of the contem-
porary is also a space of memory; it is shaped in part by what we are willing to
remember and are capable of remembering. Some traces of the poetic past can
live again and others, it seems, cannot, though our own time is never the ultim-
ate test of a poem's viability. There are no ultimate tests; there are only continu-
ing contexts, new openings and foreclosures of opportunity. The privileged status
of the present is an illusion, the fool's gold of cultural pride. It will pass.

Yet in the social spaces in which we do live there are contemporary oppor-
tunities that are available to us and us alone. The future cannot seize them; only
we can. There are, we all know, multiple spaces and multiple audiences. The bookstore audience, the subway audience, the café audience, the classroom audience, the performance audience, the political meeting audience, the factory audience; all these and other audiences overlap and articulate their own palimpsests, but they are not identical.

In tracking some of the absences and presences that mark our own memory, taking advantage of the cultural space that makes this book possible, it will be useful to open with several instructive and widely forgotten moments in the prehistory and history of modern American poetry. I have chosen a list of examples so as to make clear that these are but fragments of an unwriteable history. That invocation of incapacitation cuts several ways: the history I want to narrate is as yet unwriteable because we do not have either the full range of modern poetic texts taking up the issues of politics, class, race, or work and its exploitation—issues intertwined in some of these poems—or the distinctive and sometimes ephemeral way the poetry was published and used at various moments by distinct audiences. Furthermore, and equally important, we have not yet widely recognized who the “we” are who would be writing this history. In other words, neither our disciplinary inheritance of remembering and forgetting this poetry and its rich cultural life nor our present relation to racial trauma, exploited labor, or the history of progressive culture is sufficiently present to mind for such a history to be undertaken. This is thus paradoxically (and perhaps necessarily) a moment at once of incapacitation and opportunity. In presenting these telling fragments of a hypothetical history, then, I must also try to position them within our contemporaneity. If this seems a little oblique and abstract, that is my intention. I want to withhold clarity on that issue until its proper moment. Here then are a set of partial narratives in the form of an emerging agenda:

1890

George P. McIntyre gathers together the poems he has been writing and publishing since 1877 and publishes them as The Light of Persia or the Death of Mammon and Other Poems of Prophecy, Profit, and Peace. Though he later moves for a time to Topeka, Kansas, where he is known as the “Poet of Topeka,” he is probably living in Chicago at the time the book is issued there by the Wage Workers’ Publishing Company. The book looks back on more than a decade of economic struggle for working people and draws a series of lessons for what will prove the economic crises of the 1890s. From the Depression and tumultuous strikes of the 1870s through the difficult years of the 1880s, when massive immigration enabled employers to keep wages low, the need for basic social change was continually apparent. McIntyre’s unique book is at once historically specific—among the historical notes and small essays included in the book is one called “Who Owns America?” and subtitled “A Record of Robbery Unparalleled in the World’s History” that gives a detailed list of all the land grants to railroads that allowed their huge profits—and more broadly reflective, as he works to generalize patterns of social inequity. An 1889 poem, “America,” opens by satirizing a certain shock of recognition as relevant now as it was then; McIntyre is addressing not only the fact of poverty and hunger but also the structural blindness and illusions about America that allow such facts to be repeatedly registered with surprise. To read his poem more than a hundred years later is to credit disturbing continuities in American self-deception and to grant poetry a role in calling witness to the realities of our social life. Here are the first two stanzas out of a total of fifteen:

“Want!” in a land of plenty—
“Want!” did I hear you say—
“Want!” in a land of harvests!
“Want?” in America?—
Great God! and is it then true,
That there is want in our streets to-day?
Gaunt want and wolfish hunger,
And cold, in America?

Want! in this land of plenty.
Want! in America.
Want! where rivers of golden grain
Are freighted away?—
Want! where mast-fed swine
Are roaming a thousand hills,
And mast-fed swine of another kind
Are discounting moneyed bills?

McIntyre’s The Light of Persia is also a workable place to begin rethinking both mixed forms and the social functions of poetry in the modern period. Although current readers would find many of his poems rather stilted and unsuccessful, they do have passages of interest, like the one above, and the book as a whole, unconventional in many ways, presents a remarkable set of aims for poetry. McIntyre quotes Montaigne for his epigraph: “I have gathered a posie of other men’s flowers, and nothing but the thread that binds them together is my own.” The thread that binds, to a significant degree, is his own poems, and what it binds is a collage—distributed throughout the book—of three hundred prose and poem quotations from other authors.
Yet McIntyre largely suppresses his authorial function, for it is almost impossible when first reading through the book sequentially to have any firm idea which poems are his. The final item in the book is a partial table of contents; it includes a list of thirty poems, nineteen of which have dates of composition noted. A footnote at the bottom of the page reports that "poems bearing dates are the author’s." Midway through the book McIntyre prints a "Table of First Lines" listing thirty-one items, but the authors here are unidentified, and the "lines" quoted are in some cases full or partial stanzas of two to six lines, so the table is itself effectively a poetic text. Much of the second half of the 221-page book is a series of notes, really a group of essays presenting social and economic background and evidence for the general claims stated earlier in the poems themselves. The titles include "Why Farmers Are Poor" and "Who Owns America: Our Public Domain—A Record of Robbery Unparalleled in the World’s History," the essay cited earlier that offers a state-by-state list of acreage granted to railroads. "The poems herewith presented," he writes early on, "aim to specify and lay the blame for present inequitable conditions where they belong."

One contemporary review described The Light of Persia as a kind of one-volume library on economic issues affecting the working class. McIntyre is clearly trying to draw together a Left tradition of poetry and social commentary and to establish it as a more authentically democratic American voice. It is the poetry, however, that offers the broadest moral and political generalizations. Thus his poem "Enbalm It" urges us to fold up the American flag and put it away, since the flag can no longer justifiably fly over a land whose social realities belie the flag’s symbolic history. He also puts forward a series of basic economic solutions in sly form—"Abolition of Wage Slavery. Abolition of Private Property. Abolition of Money. Abolition of Poverty."—and repeatedly prints the call "AGITATE!" at the bottom of his pages. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of McIntyre’s work, it offers a model of poetry as revolutionary intertextual generalization, a partly anonymous and collective discourse that binds together history, economics, and morality in a project of clarifying the need for social change. It is an exemplary instance of premodern collage that reorients our memories of the social functions collage was sometimes intended to serve.

Between McIntyre and some of the great mixed forms of modernism—from Jean Toomer’s Cane and William Carlos Williams’s The Descent of Winter to Muriel Rukeyser’s "The Book of the Dead"—sometimes oblique and improbable and sometimes rather direct connections can be established. They are hardly connections demonstrating influence, since it is likely none of these poets knew McIntyre’s work. They are rather connections in the very different ways poets took up mixed forms as part of efforts to lay out broad visions of social life in the face of a dominant culture that was often inhospitable or worse. But before one could get to the sense of necessity informing any of these later works many changes literary and otherwise would have to take place. One of the first of these was a more complete disenchantment with national power than McIntyre himself could feel, since he still believed the country could be reformed. That change would come for some when they were confronted with U.S. imperialism at the end of the century; for many others it would arrive with the Great Depression of the 1930s.

1899

The text is the one American poem of protest against abusive working conditions almost universally remembered, remembered not only by literature professors but also, for many years, by the general public. For decades every high school student read it and some still do. The poem, of course, is Edwin Markham’s (1852-1940) "The Man with the Hoe," first published in the San Francisco Examiner in January 1899 and soon reprinted in newspapers across the country. It was one of several protest poems Markham published and not the only one to receive wide circulation, but its status is nonetheless exceptional. It was eventually translated into forty languages and became one of the anthems of the American labor movement, though in some ways, as I shall show, an atypical one. It also provoked a genuine national debate about its meaning and implications, one of the few times in our history a poem was the subject of such wide discussion and controversy over its proper interpretation. It was admired, attacked, imitated, and satirized repeatedly. Frank Norris made it a central referent for the main character in his 1901 novel The Octopus. It was reprinted in numerous special editions and pamphlets, though apparently there were no successful takers for railroad magnate Collis Huntington’s pledge of a $5,000 reward for a poem refuting "The Man with the Hoe" with equal vigor. People argued over its meaning with a dedication usually reserved for specialists. And it is, as it happens, unquestionably the perfect poem to have played the role it played in American culture then and since. One reader who wrote to the Examiner (March 11, 1899) worried that the poem’s depressing depiction of rural working conditions would lead to "thousands of misguided country youth flocking to our cities," while another a week earlier had castigated it as "the dreamy note of the inaccurate thinker stirred to sentimental sorrow by the appearance of wrong, too careless or unable to distinguish aright the cause of the trouble."

The poem is an explicit response to an oil painting by the French artist Jean François Millet (1814-1875), one of several paintings on contemporary agricultural working-class subjects Millet produced at the middle of the nineteenth century. Now in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, Millet’s "Man with a Hoe" depicts a roughshod farmer or agricultural worker, probably exhausted and
certainly leaning forward on his hoe in a flat scrub landscape as yet untamed and unplowed. Just when Markham first saw the painting or a reproduction of it is unclear; he gave conflicting accounts during the course of his life. In any case, in one of the many ironies surrounding this text and its dissemination and reception, it is worth noting that the painting was first brought to San Francisco, across the bay from Markham’s Oakland, California, home, in 1891, by Mrs. William H. Crocker, the wife of the heir to a fortune amassed by one of California’s railroad barons. Charles Crocker had been inspired to virtually enslave Chinese laborers to help build the transcontinental railroad. Millet’s painting had provoked something of a scandal when it was first exhibited in Paris; the artist was accused of being both an anarchist and a socialist. But within a few decades its sentiments seemed acceptable to a wealthy San Francisco patron of the arts. She presumably did not see her family’s economic history reflected in the overburdened laborer who fills the central third of the canvas.

While the painting was the decisive stimulus for the poem, Markham also clearly had in mind the great American labor struggles of the preceding decades, notably the coal strikes of the 1860s and ’70s, the rail strikes of the 1870s, ’80s, and ’90s, and such historic events as the Haymarket massacre of 1886 and the Homestead, Pennsylvania, strike of steel and iron workers in 1892. Markham had himself been a farm laborer and had herded sheep as a young boy, so he also had some direct knowledge of the sort of work he was describing. The poem is effective in marshaling moral outrage and linking it to literariness on workers’ behalf. Its indictment of the ravages wrought by those in power was decisive for its time, in part because Markham treated exploitation as a violation of God’s will. The poem is equally successful at issuing a broad revolutionary warning to capitalists and politicians.

"The Man with the Hoe" also crystallizes a hundred years of American labor protest poetry and song and finally takes much of its message to a broad national audience. Markham no doubt knew some of that tradition, at least John Greenleaf Whittier’s 1850 Songs of Labor and Other Poems if perhaps not more ephemeral texts like John Mcclvlaine’s 1799 broadside poem “Address to the Journeymen Cordwainers L.B. of Philadelphia”: “Cordwainers! Arouse! The time has come/When our rights should be fully protected.” But the tradition in America had long been persistently dual: professional writers taking up labor issues and agitating in verse for decent wages and working conditions and working people themselves producing their own rousing songs and poems. Philip Foner’s marvelous 1975 American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century is the most comprehensive collection. The painting that inspired Markham is partly ambiguous: we cannot really know whether Millet’s man with the hoe is too crushed to speak or has just stepped forward to tell us his story.

For Markham the question is settled. “Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox,” the laborer does not utter a word. His presence is riveting but altogether determined by his victimhood. He has no culture of his own. We see “the emptiness of ages in his face.” The laborer’s imaged form speaks volumes, but he himself is mute. Despite the fact that the subaltern in this case had repeatedly spoken, Markham retroactively declares him unable to speak. The history of indigenous labor protest and song is forgotten and Markham instead speaks on behalf of mute suffering. It is the poem’s address that raises the possibility “this dumb Terror shall reply to God, / After the silence of the centuries.” The relentless oathing of the worker persists throughout the poem despite Markham’s evident outrage at his exploitation. It is that consistent oathing of the worker—“Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw? / . . . Whose breath blew out the light within this brain”—that made the poem widely acceptable at the time and earned it partial acceptance within the dominant culture’s literary canon for so long. As a mute object of sympathy, the worker has no role in establishing the meaning of his suffering.

The impulse to dehumanize or infantilize victims, to deny the existence of their alternative cultures, was hardly new. Americans had done it with Native Americans and with their African-American slaves. Nor was awareness of the risks of a racial othering and dehumanization unknown. It is one of the themes of abolitionist poetry, and it surfaces again in turn-of-the-century poetry protesting the slaughter by American troops of the people of the Philippines, poems contemporary with Markham’s. But the appeal of such power relationships leads us repeatedly to reenact them. In Markham’s case, ironically, the implicit reaffirmation of such hierarchies helped give the poem remarkable cultural warrant.

Given the poem’s huge and instant success it is not surprising that the Examiner should want to commemorate its pride in being the first place to publish it. So that same year (1899) the San Francisco paper reinvented the poem as an elaborately illustrated supplement to its Sunday edition. It is by far the most memorable reprinting of “The Man with the Hoe.” Already oddly positioned within William Randolph Hearst’s sometimes melodramatic newspaper, the poem has its inner tensions further exacerbated by the Examiner’s richly contradictory fin-de-siècle presentation. Notoriously imperialist, the paper was also by turns sensationalist and antagonistic toward the barons of monopoly capitalism. Markham, wholly in sympathy with the plight of exploited workers, was nonetheless uneasy with organized labor and its aggressive and collective agency from below. All this, curiously, is enhanced by the poem’s new incarnation.

The poem is printed on a large sheet of heavy paper about twenty-two inches wide. This broadside in turn had a series of images printed on its reverse
side before it was folded in half so as to make the poem into a folder with a front and back cover. Unashamed of stylistic contradiction or cheerfully eclectic, the accompanying images mix elements of a Victorian scrapbook with art nouveau and Edwardian book illustration. An oval portrait of Markham, framed in laurel leaves, shares the cover with an engraving after the central figure in Millet's painting (Fig. 1). On the back cover a skeletal grim reaper rides a horse of the apocalypse down a road past poplar trees straining against the wind (Fig. 2). Ringing the blade of his scythe is a crown that once perhaps sat on a head of state. Above the image two lines heralding a future of radical change and retribution are quoted from Markham: "When whirlwinds of rebellion shake the world! How will it be with Kingdoms and with Kings."

Inside, the poem is presented in two floral frames on opposite sides of the
"The Man With the Hoe."

Written After Seeing Millet's World-Famous Painting.

By Edwin Markham.

The satyr of his face.
And on his back the burden of the world.
Who made him dead to rapture and despair,
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,
Who loosed and let down this brutal jaw?
Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?
Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?

Is this the thing God made and gave
To have dominion over sea and land;
To trample the stars and search the heavens for power;
To feel the passion of immortality?
Is this the dream He dreamed who shaped the sun
And planted the blue wilderness with light?
Down all the stretch of Hall to its last gulf
There is no shape more terrible than this—
More tangled with censures of the world's blind greed—
More filled with signs and portents for the soul—
More fraught with menace to the universe.

What gulf between him and the seraphim!
The rift of dawn, the redden of the rose?
Through this dread shape the suffering ages look;
Time's tragedy is in that sculpting stone.
Through this dread shape humanity betrayed,
Plundered, professed and disenchanted,
Cries protest to the Judges of the World,
A protest that is also prophecies.

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
Is this the handwork you give to God?
This monstrous thing distorted and soul-queased?
How will you ever straighten up this shape?
Tame it again with immortality;
Give back the upward looking and the light;
Rebuild it in the music and the dream;
Make right the immemorial Injustice,
Perfidious wrongs, immoveable worn?

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
How will the Future reckon with this Man?
How answer his brute question in that hour
When whirlwinds of revolution shake the world?
How will it be with kingdoms and with kings—
With those who shaped him to the thing he is—
When this dumb Terror shall reply to God,
After the silences of centuries?

Fig. 3. The San Francisco Examiner's illustrated version of 'The Man with the Hoe,' Author's Collection.

sword and a wreath of laurel. On her shoulders an adoring eagle is perched to serve as her wings. Below her the river of life, above her the clouds, sweep in harmonious brush strokes toward a redeemed destiny.

Nowhere in the illustration are there factory owners or workers to be seen. The illustration interprets the poem as a symbolic confrontation between abstract, mythological forces. Human agency is imaged out of it. If this presentation underlines the poem's high cultural ambitions, then, it also underwrites its commitment to eternal values rather than immediate (and potentially threatening) historical contexts. It is a version of the poem, needless to say, that the
English profession would find more suitable, a properly transcendentalizing interpretation of the poem’s idealizations. It is the version of the poem that generations of high school teachers have found fittingly literary. Contemporary struggles, inequities at arm’s distance, are not the concern of this sort of literariness, which awaits a pause to be regained in the fullness of time but accessible now in unsullied aestheticism.

The poem itself of course had other cultural effects. Despite its problematic curtailment of workers’ agency, its condemnation of exploitation made it possible to articulate it to labor reform movements. It was open to multiple interpretations, only one of which is built into this illustrated version. Meanwhile, worker poets themselves would write poems suggesting they take matters into their own hands.

1900
Morrison I. Swift (1856–1946), a well-known pamphleteer on Left issues, publishes *Aid of Empire*, a book of poems devoted substantially to America’s genocidal war in the Philippines. At first the Philippines, a Spanish colony for three centuries, were merely a sideshow to our war with Spain that was focused on Cuba. But after Commodore Dewey sank the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay in May 1898, we had to confront the Filipinos ourselves. An Anti-Imperialist League met in Boston in November 1898, but such sentiments were swept aside in widespread national enthusiasm for this first overseas adventure. Literally hundreds of prowar poems were published in newspapers across the country that year. Echoing the popular cry “Remember the Maine!” they certified the principle of Manifest Destiny and sanctified the use of military force. One may read some of these poems in S.A. Witherbee’s 1898 anthology *Spanish American War Songs* or in B. E. Stevenson’s 1908 collection *Poems of American History.* Meanwhile, Rudyard Kipling urged us on in his notorious poem “The White Man’s Burden,” and in February 1899 we embarked on a major war of conquest against the Filipino independence movement. Some four thousand Americans and more than two hundred thousand Filipinos would eventually die in a war that became increasingly brutal as it shifted from large-scale battles to guerrilla tactics.

Late in 1901, after American officers were issued orders to kill any Filipinos over the age of ten in certain contested areas, public sentiment here would shift against the war. By then antiwar poetry would open out into a mass movement. But there were also poets, like Swift, who were in the vanguard of anti-imperialist politics, issuing effective poems highlighting the war’s racist politics and economics. In satiric and polemical poems like “Imperial Sam,” “Go Die For the President King,” “American Love,” “Butcher McKinley,” “Might and Right,” and “The Primitive Races Shall Be Cultured,” Swift attacks capitalism and exposes imperialism’s hidden logic. Often he takes up public discourses and conventional literary forms in an effort to rearticulate popular common sense toward political critique. “Give us this day our neighbor’s bread,” he writes in “Prayer of the Rich,” for “we’ll sell or eat it in his stead.” Here is Swift, in the midst of the Philippine war, borrowing some of his diction and rhythms from Shakespeare and speaking in the persona of President McKinley. The poem “Butcher McKinley,” 130 lines long, is composed at the turning point of the centuries and driven deep into the rhetoric of its own time. But Swift also reaches back and forward to indict the whole history of imperialism as a form of sanctified racism:

Sweet friends, sweet fellowmen, sweet voters,  
Call not murder murder if God wills.  
'Tis blasphemy, abortion, miscontent, abomination,  
Hell's own self, to charge dear God with crime.  
I must as many Filipinos kill as shall appease  
God's wrath at them for spurning my decree...  
I am a pious man, a holy man, and member of a church.  
Did I not tell the damned blacks  
To ground their arms?...  
Fiends, monsters, toads, green lizards, scorpions, snakes...  
They must submit. For mean and weak and black  
There is no virtue but submission.  
After submission,—well, we'll see...  
It is a law of mine  
That niggers must submit to my sublimity...  
And how I love them! God! Everyone that dies  
In disobedience penetrates my soul!...  
Send him across the brine to cleave the skulls  
Of those foul imps of mud the Filipinos.

Although Swift focuses overtly on the racism underlying imperialism, the poem also implicitly challenges the racism displayed by one wing of the anti-imperialist movement. Some Americans argued that winning the war and annexing the Philippines would encourage undesirable Filipino immigration to the United States. In its condemnation of pious racism, “Butcher McKinley” draws on the history of the abolitionist movement and also looks forward to poems like Langston Hughes’s “Christ in Alabama.” But the poem readily challenges more recent imperialist ventures as well, such as the Vietnam War. Part of what is so
startling about the poem is the contemporaneity of its insights. The knowledge that racism underlies and underwrites international relations is knowledge we often suppress. Apparently it must be relearned by each generation.

Although almost unknown now, Swift’s poems are notable for the way that they analyze both the racist rhetoric of the war in the Philippines and the mechanisms for rationalizing the war in other social institutions. In “Cradle Magic of the Millionaire” he describes a pattern no less relevant now than it was a hundred years ago:

And paint it soft with words like these—
Humanity, Philanthropy, The Love of God,
Reward in Heaven, and Sweet Improvement
Of Some Sudden Savagery . . .
How could we slide the populace to hell
Without this patriotic grease!

And he reminds us how nations deal with those who protest their policies: “Every opposition reason/Gibbet with the name of treason.” Swift was well-prepared for this kind of cultural analysis, for he had already written (and would continue to write throughout his career) a series of political pamphlets, from Capitalists Are the Cause of the Unemployed (1894) and Anti-Imperialism (1899) to The Evil Religion Does (1927). But by the turn of the century he would be joined by other poets, including William Vaughan Moody, in a mass antiwar movement. For a moment poets sought to command popular wisdom and common sense, ceding them to no other cultural arenas. For the next decade and more, at least for labor audiences and for those active in socialist politics, poetry would have more moral authority than either religion or government. This is a power that would be won and lost repeatedly over the following decades, but the antiwar poetry written at the turn of the century is in many ways a model of what can happen when political alienation reaches a critical mass.

For the first poets who spoke out about the Spanish-American War no political movement, no new network of social organization, was necessary, for they were simply serving the dominant structures of national power. But by 1899 an alternative cultural formation—included meetings and newspapers and poems—had taken shape. Swift’s poems were thus part of an oppositional intertext, a phenomenon we will see in operation more fully in chapter 3. Swift’s distinctive contribution to that anti-imperialist intertext was both in the more detailed analysis he offered in his poems and in their rhetorical fluency. But he was not alone. There were several interesting volumes by other poets, but the most notable anti-imperialist anthology is no doubt Liberty Poems, issued by the

New England Anti-Imperialist League in June 1900. Its frontispiece shows American soldiers at ease above a ditch strewn with Filipino bodies (Fig 4), an image that uncannily opens links with Central America earlier and later and with Vietnam in our own time. The copy I hold as I write was given as a gift by William Lloyd Garrison, Jr., son of the great abolitionist, exactly a hundred years ago. Like his father, he wrote poems about heroes among people of color. Like Swift, he wrote a poem denouncing McKinley. Like many of the
other anti-imperialist poets of 1899, Garrison and Swift understood that race was once again at the center of a crisis in American democracy and in the ideals that undergird the nation’s social contract. If slavery betrayed the assertion of human rights that was fundamental to the Declaration of Independence and to the U.S. Constitution’s Bill of Rights, so too did suppressing the rights of a darker people in the Philippines.

In the selective memory of literary academicians, Eliot’s The Waste Land and “The Hollow Men”—with their general and sometimes apocalyptic picture of social degeneration—would come to epitomize the kind of disenchantment with the modern world that poets were capable of registering, but both at the turn of the century and at other points poets concentrated instead on the total corruption of specific political powers. In the late 1890s the recurrent hope that the existing state might be transformed and directed toward progressive social interventions retreats for a time before growing evidence of its international imperialism. For McIntyre the agency of the state was confined to its own territory. But for a number of poets at the turn of the century, our intervention in Cuba, the war with Spain, and finally the genocidal slaughter in the Philippines made imperialism central to America’s political identity. A sense of betrayed idealism runs from McIntyre to Swift, but it is focused quite differently in the two poets.

1910–1940

Over thirty years, a series of Chinese immigrants passing through Angel Island in San Francisco Bay write poems about their lives on the walls of the wooden barracks in which they are housed. Some are being deported back to China; others are waiting to see if they fall within the few exempted classes established in the racist 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and can thus gain entry to the country. Although people from other countries are processed quickly, Chinese immigrants are typically detained for months, either waiting for medical examinations or undergoing highly detailed interrogations to test whether they really have relatives in the United States and are thus entitled to entrance under the law. Those who choose to appeal their cases can spend years essentially imprisoned on the island. The poems they write on the barracks walls talk about the voyage from China (“I ate wind and tasted waves for more than twenty days”), about the strain of incarceration (“The harsh laws pile layer upon layer; how can I dissipate my hatred?”), about the American officials they dealt with (“Even while they are tyrannical, they still claim to be humanitarian”), and about their fantasies of revenge (“I will not speak of love when I leave the immigration station”). These poems are not only inscribing a record of their passage; they are also giving a cultural education to those who would follow them. Indeed, some of the poems comment on one another. Of the poems that survive—somewhat more than 130—about half, including the two that follow in English translation by Him Mark Lai, are four lines long:

Instead of remaining a citizen of China, I willingly became an ox.
I intended to come to America to earn a living.
The Western styled buildings are lofty; but I have not the luck to live in them.
How was anyone to know that my dwelling place would be a prison?

The dragon out of water is humiliated by ants;
The fierce tiger who is caged is baited by a child.
As long as I am imprisoned, how can I dare strive for supremacy?
An advantageous position for revenge will surely come one day.

Because these are translations from the Chinese, some reticence in interpreting them is appropriate for those, like me, who cannot read them in the original language. Moreover, the poems have a unique textual status; they were inscribed in a “book” whose pages were the white walls of the immigration station barracks. For their English translation in Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940 they were arranged quite sensibly in categories that roughly reflect the temporal sequence of the journey from China to America and the experience on Angel Island: “The Voyage,” “The Detainment,” “The Weak Shall Conquer,” “About Westerners,” and “Deportees, Transients.” The section devoted to fantasies of revenge, “The Weak Shall Conquer,” follows the initial shock and growing anger at the experience detailed in “The Detainment.” The stories of those to be deported make up the last group. But the “pages” of the poems’ primary inscription at Angel Island take more the form of a collage or a palimpsest, in which the multiple stages of journey and reaction are in dialogue with one another. The time of the barracks walls is simultaneous, not linear; the lessons of the voyage are at once fused and dispersed.

Since these poems waited decades to be translated, they may also serve to represent the hundreds of immigrant poems—in languages like Italian, Finnish, and Yiddish—that have never been translated. The Angel Island poems, composed on a racialized border erected within the United States, were not actually poems of the American Left, a tradition of which their authors were unaware. Yet they signal the poems many had written on comparable internal borders. Such immigrant poems, often radical poems of the Left, were written and published in the United States not only in newspapers but also in anthologies and single-author books. They are part of our invisible and (so far) unwritable literary history.
The city is Chicago. A national hub for rail transportation, Chicago’s commercial and political significance is not in question. Nor is its status as a center of union activity in doubt. But the rail unions were hampered by multiple and divided representation. Hence the amalgamation movement.

In February a mass meeting is planned to galvanize the effort. To build attendance a small purple card, a little more than 3 by 5 inches, is printed and distributed to members and interested parties (Fig. 5). The card in question had its day—Sunday, February 23, 1923, to be precise—and then most copies were presumably disposed of or lost. This is in any case the only copy I have seen.

A number of things are interesting about the card, including the presence of William Z. Foster (1881–1961) as a speaker. Foster in the days when he was not only a national labor leader but also a secret member of the American Communist Party, which he would later head. The speakers’ names appear on one side of the card, along with the time and place of the meeting and other pertinent information. The other side of the card may be somewhat of a surprise to those more familiar with recent union history. It is occupied by a poem, an irreverent, upbeat, cheeky poem about strike breakers, “scabs,” and about their status in this life and hereafter. Some would call it doggerel, and, if that is the case, the text displays no internal evidence of anticipatory embarrassment at that designation. The poem, which draws on a tradition of literary encounters with St. Peter, is, as it were, altogether enthusiastic about being what it is:

**St. Peter and the Scab**

St. Peter stood guard at the golden gate
With solemn mien and air sedate,
When up at the top of the golden stair
A shrouded figure ascended there,
Applied for admission. He came and stood
Before St. Peter, so great and good,
In hope the City of Peace to win,
And asked St. Peter to let him in.

St. Peter said with a gleam in his eye,
“Who is tending this gate, sir, you or I?
I’ve heard of you and your gift of gab; You are what is known on earth as a scab.”
Thereupon he arose in his stature tall
And pressed a button upon the wall,
And said to the imp who answered the bell:
“Escort this fellow around to Hell.”

“Tell Satan to give him a seat alone On a red-hot griddle up near the throne; But stay, even the Devil can’t stand the smell Of a cooking scab on a griddle in Hell. It would cause a revolt, a strike, I know, If I sent you down to the Imps below, Go back to your masters on earth and tell That they don’t even want a scab in Hell.”

**Fig. 5.** The front and back of a 1923 poem card advertising a union organizing meeting and promoting attendance with “St. Peter and the Scab.” The card is dark purple in color. Author’s collection.
Union Poem
By J. P. Thompson

You cannot be a Union Man,
No matter how you try,
Unless you think in terms of "We,"
Instead of terms of "I."
WHADDA YA WANT TO BREAK YOUR BACK
FOR THE BOSS FOR

Tune: What Do You Want to Make Those Eyes at Me For?

BY JOE FOLEY

Troubling along in life from morn' til night,
Wearin' away all for the Parasite;
'Workin' like a mule with a number two,
Puffin' like a bellows when the day is through;
Steering a load of gravel through the muck and slob,
Packin' a hod of mustard til you damn near flop;
Trying to bust a gut for two twenty-five,
Pluggin' like a sucker til five.

CHORUS:
So whadda ya want to break your back for the boss for,
When it don't mean life to you;
Do you think it right to struggle day and night,
And plow like Hell for the Parasite;
So whadda ya want to break your back for the boss for,
When there's more in life for you.
Slow up Bill! that's the way to beat the System;
Join the Wobbly gang, they've got the bosses guessing;
So whadda ya want to break your back for the boss for,
When it don't mean life to you.

Do it all today and you'll soon find out,
Tomorrow there'll be nothing but to hang about,
Looking at the "job sign," wondering why you rave,
With a wrinkle on your belly like an ocean wave;
Doughnuts then begin to hang a little high,
You're pinched by the Bull for a "German spy";
You're nothing but a bum, says the Judge with a smile,
Thirty days on the Rock Pile.

CHORUS—

---

Fig. 8. 'The Scissorbills,' an union organizing poem card (c. 1915). A 'scissorbill' is a worker who is not class conscious, who is deceived by bourgeois shtics and ideas. Cf. Joe Hill's famous song 'Scissor Bill.' Author's collection.

Fig. 9. A union organizing poem card (c. 1917). Author's collection.

When Jacob Margolis was to speak that November in the House of the Mass on St. Aubin and Gratiot Avenues, the announcement of the event was stampt in purple on leftover cards and the same card thus put to use again. Radical poem cards were common in the previous decade as well; the Social Publishing Company in Seattle issued more than a score of them as postcard (Figs. 8 and 9).
At times of crisis or mass action, the IWW also continued to print poem cards, such as the poem card "Political Prisoners" (Fig. 10), which dates from the 1921–1922 amnesty campaign that followed the infamous Red Scare after World War One, when most of the IWW's leaders and many of its members were in prison. Both the poem and the illustration are by one of those prisoners, Eugene Barnett, who was framed and convicted after American Legion members stormed an IWW hall in Centralia, Washington, in 1919. It was the IWW victims, not the lawless legion members, who were punished. One IWW member was castrated and lynched, while seven others (including Barnett) received long prison sentences in April 1920. Barnett, who was born in 1891, and later became an ardent member of both the United Mine Workers and the IWW, served more than eleven years of a twenty-five-to-forty-year sentence. He wrote the poem and drew the illustration while in prison, and it was distributed anonymously to symbolize all those imprisoned unjustly and to build support for their release. Issuing it anonymously also reinforced the IWW's determination not to file individual pleas for clemency; they sought freedom for all political prisoners, though Barnett was in fact released when his wife was dying of cancer. The illustration for "Political Prisoners," which was later collected in Barnett's 1940 pamphlet Nature's Woodland Bowers, shows the American eagle itself behind bars, and the text describes the same fundamental betrayal of principle:

Hail! the American eagle,
Emblem of men once free,
Languishing now in prison
In its own loved country;
Though its heart is broken
Its spirit is defiant still,
Though prisons break its body
They cannot break its will.

It is not just members of a movement but the basic spirit of democracy that has been imprisoned. The poetic soul of the country—its very will to freedom—is now imperiled. There was an audience of IWW members, families, and sympathizers ready for this message. When the card could get through the mails, carried in the very belly of a corrupt federal system, it could reach out to recruit a still wider audience.

"St. Peter and the Scab," then, issued not long after Barnett's poem card, invokes and extends a tradition in the American labor movement in which poems and songs help workers interpret and articulate their lives and draw

them toward solidarity with their peers. Over several decades, the labor movement used poetry not only to build or unify membership but also to educate workers and to restate core beliefs and values. Poetry was the ongoing discourse of pride in the labor movement's universal common sense. It elevated that common sense to a principle of identity and solidarity.

The repeated use of poetry in this way also had effects in other domain
Certainly it helped define more broadly the social uses to which poetry could be put. It thus made poetry available to groups and constituencies that might successfully use poems to build solidarity among existing members and reach out to new ones. If we want to know what poetry meant to audiences in the 1890s, or the 1920s, we need to preserve and have access to objects like these. For they supplement our inevitable speculation about the inherent meanings of texts with evidence of their socially constructed and contingent meaning, with the actual use to which poems were put. Now incredibly rare, all these cards and broadsides make contributions to the historical meaning of the genre. If we want to know what poetry meant in 1923, in other words, we should not let the poem card of "St. Peter and the Scab" be swept aside in the wake of the issue of The Dial containing T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land, published but one year earlier.

Although "St. Peter and the Scab" has no lack of irony, it is not quite the sort of irony English professors have historically valued. And the poem is nothing if not unambiguous about its cultural stance and who its friends and enemies are, despite the fact that the scab serves both as a figure for the devil in disguise and a disguise even the devil would reject. The poem, as one might expect, has left no trace in academic literary history. But it is an interesting example of how poetry was used at a particular moment and within a certain vital tradition.

1916–1918

The sense of a progressive tradition around labor issues perhaps makes it possible now to recuperate a very different sort of text. If both "The Man with the Hoe" and "St. Peter and the Scab" were public uses of poetry, my next example is partly a more private one, specifically a 9-by-11½-inch scrapbook kept between 1916 and 1918. It was compiled in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, by one Rudolph Blum, who was twenty years old in 1916. I purchased it from a rare book dealer in Massachusetts for $125 in 1994. The dealer had found it in another bookshop in a box of mixed materials from various sources.

Following a fragmentary handwritten table of contents listing some of the items to follow and a holograph page reflecting on the realities of modern labor ("To one who has worked amid the crashing din and terrific heat of the steel mills or the tomb like dark and silence of the coal mines... We might well term the modern industrial plants as 'penal institutions' where the working class is serving a life sentence"), the rest of the scrapbook is effectively divided in two halves. The first half includes news clippings, union broadsides, and personal notes (Fig. 11), along with the smallest poem card I have yet seen, "Songs of 8 Hours," about 4-by-2½ inches with four tiny stanzas printed on it.
Songs of an Hours.

Come on you Rounders,
We want you, in the A. I. U.
All we want is an eight hour day;
With nine and one and half hours pay.

Put a sign on your bonnet,
With eight hours on it,
And we don’t care what the bosses say.
When the strike is over,
We’ll roam in clover,
For we’ll work eight hours a day.

What are you, What are you?
We belong to the A. I. U.
What for?—EIGHT HOURS.

Oneasips, twoasips, threeasips—Bang!!
We Belong to the Eight Hour Gang.
Are we in it, well I should smile,
We’ve been in for a Helloa while.
What for?—EIGHT HOURS.

Fig. 12. A poem card from Blum’s scrapbook. Author’s collection.

But I am getting ahead of my story. The second half of the scrapbook is something like a compendium of values, loyalties, and interests. It gathers together the collector’s core beliefs and social concerns, and it does so in the form of a fairly substantial personal poetry anthology. Sixty-two poems are clipped from newspapers and three are present in typescript, along with eight assorted editorials, news stories, and prose parables. Like the news stories, notices, and handwritten notes of the first half of the scrapbook, the poems are layered on top of one another in overlapping sequence like the scales of a fish.

And the pages are machine pleated, perhaps to accommodate this overlapping technique (Figs. 13–15). The pleated and layered physical form of the scrapbook is not unusual for the period. One can find similar scrapbooks collecting cards or invitations. Blum, then, is reinvigorating a commonplace domestic form with political energy.

The scrapbook is framed temporally by two events in Rudolph Blum’s life, both arrests for political activity, the first in 1916, the second in 1918. In April and May of 1916 a strike at the Westinghouse steelworks was on the verge of spreading to other plants in Pittsburgh. The possibility of a general citywide strike was on everyone’s mind. Rudolph Blum, county secretary of the Socialist Party and an IWW sympathizer, was one of the leaders of a march that went from plant to plant to build solidarity. On May 1 steelworkers at Braddock rose up to demand an eight-hour workday as well, and the following day the march arrived from the city’s east. It was met by gunfire from the steel trust guards and when the resulting chaos passed, three workers were dead and forty wounded. Three strike leaders, including Blum, were arrested and charged not only with inciting to riot but also, incredibly, as accessories to murder. It was a judicial scene to be repeated in Centralia three years later. In this case only the first charge held, and Blum was sentenced to eighteen months in Pittsburgh’s notorious county jail. On his release he proceeded to agitate against United States participation in World War I. That brought him to the attention of the Justice Department. An August 1918 newspaper clipping in the scrapbook describes Rudolph and his older brother John, 24, respectively, as Austrians and reports that they were being held in the Northside police station as “dangerous alien enemies.”

The two arrests—for union organizing and antiwar activism—hang over the poems as well. For the poems are mostly prolabor or antiwar. Together they articulate the paired ideals underlying Blum’s politics and his social activism. Both halves of the book, then, are autobiographical, the first focused on events the second on values. Some writers with surviving reputations are included here, represented by Edwin Markham’s “Man’s Right to Work,” Carl Sandburg’
"Murmurings in a Field Hospital," Louis Ginsberg’s “The Marching,” a portion of a Whitman poem, and reprints of Thomas Carlyle’s “What Is War?” and Sir Thomas More’s “The Modern Moloch.” Edgar Guest’s “Made in America,” with its confidence in a workplace where “no slavery darkens the scene,” is buried, sardonically, under other poems. But the mostly forgotten poets of the IWW and of the feminist antirwar movement—Estelle Kobrin, Jane Burr, Helen
lands” to join hands and “make this the masters’ last damned war.” Clement Wood in “To Labor” urges workers to “rouse from this mad obedience.” S. A. De Witt, represented here with several poems, in “At Last” heralds the moment when “the ghetto ghosts, the outlawed of the earth,” will “unite to set the whole world free.” Finally, Donald Crocker in “The IWW” praises these “sons of the sansculottes” who return “blow for blow” to “the civilization that has cast them out,” and two poets eulogize murdered IWW leader Frank Little. The poems were all public, of course, as most or all were printed in newspapers at the time, from Women’s Sphere to the New York Call. But their use here—to reinforce and deepen Blum’s beliefs, whether as aids to reflection, goads to action, or figures for a political community under assault—is more personal and tells us, by implication, something of what such poetry may have meant to modern men and women in the labor movement of the teens.

Blum’s scrapbook is thus a model for a way of reading and a record of a certain sort of activist literary memory. Things done and things believed are yoked together, rhymed, in the conceptual agency granted one reader by the poems he collected. He does not simply read serially but rather reads to gather together texts appropriate to a coherently constructed identity. The presence of the poems in radical newspapers of course suggests that other readers used poems the way Blum did whether or not they kept scrapbooks. Thus Blum’s scrapbook comes to us as the record of an audience for poetry at the center of the great labor struggles in the early part of the century.

A decade later, with the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression, the lines between part-time working-class poets and professional writers became increasingly blurred. Newspapers and journals sought out worker poets, and many poets who might have had white-collar jobs found themselves unemployed, doing manual labor, or deeply involved in labor activism. Already sporadically in place for decades, a dialogue—a kind of call-and-response chorus of voices—between professional and unprofessional labor poets began to increase and diversify. They published in some of the same venues, echoed themes and images in one another’s work, worked together on cultural and political projects, and soon constituted a collective cultural presence and force. When Edwin Rolfe in 1931 opened his poem “Credo,” with lines defining the necessities of collective action, “To welcome multitudes—the miracle of deeds/performed in unison—the mind must first renounce the fiction of the self,” he was echoing the poet whose succinct, complementary credo was distributed by the Wobblies on that dark red poem card. It is J. P. Thompson’s “Union Poem,” only four lines long:
1934

When local 89 of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the Italian Dressmakers’ Union, met in 1934 in New York at a dinner to celebrate its fifteenth anniversary, it issued a 250-page, red-felt-covered, gold-embossed book to mark the occasion. It included greetings from Norman Thomas and Albert Einstein and essays on labor history. Poems, both in Italian and English, also played a major role in the book, and some were beautifully illustrated in color, including two by one of the local’s founders, Arturo Giovannitti (1884–1959). Giovannitti had been head of the ILGWU’s educational department through most of the 1920s, had worked in its information office in the early 1930s, and became head of the Italian Labor Education Bureau in 1934.

By the time of the 1934 dinner, however, his fame as a poet had mostly faded, except among members of his union and the previous generation on the Left. One might say that the dinner marks the end of his substantial prestige in literary circles. For the twelve years between 1912 and 1924, however, no other poet, save perhaps the legendary songwriter Joe Hill (1879–1915), was so fully identified at once with the abstract ideals of the labor movement and with its history of suppression by the American legal system. In a groundbreaking essay about Giovannitti, Hester L. Furey calls him “a poet of the judicial system.”

His best-known poems, “The Walker” and “The Cage,” were written while he was in prison awaiting trial as an accessory to murder. The IWW had asked him to help lead the Italian textile workers who were the mainstay of the major 1912 Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile strike. After a policeman killed a female picketer, the authorities came up with the idea of arresting Giovannitti and two others as accessories for having organized the strike in the first place. They were acquitted ten months later but not before the strikers were victorious and the frameup had made Giovannitti an international figure.

In “The Walker” and “The Cage,” as Furey writes, Giovannitti ends up “using the image of a jail to stand for all dehumanizing physical and mental systems of containment and restraint” (33):

Giovannitti’s poems foreground the contradiction between his society’s supposed value of individual fulfillment and inner life and that society’s investments in capitalism—he insists that workers have souls. Once in circulation, the poems came to be read not only as emblems of Ettor and Giovannitti in the

Essex County jail, but of the plight of unskilled workers subject to the whims of capitalism, in Lawrence and all over the world.

The poems were reprinted not only in places like the International Socialist Review but also in mainstream venues like Current Literature and Atlantic Monthly. In the process Giovannitti showed members of the literary establishment “poetry where they had seen none before—in jail, in the courtroom, on a bench in Mulberry Park” (41). Moreover, “his work had a nasty and uncompromising way of connecting politics with inner beauty, taking logic of the ‘universal subject’ so dear to poetry critics and carrying them to their shockingly democratic extreme” (37).

He soon became one of the legendary figures of the American labor movement. A special color plate honors him at the close of the book produced for the 1934 dinner, and his poems “Te Deum of Labor” and “When the Great Day Came” are given special prominence (Fig. 16). Both poems continue his lifelong effort to place transcendent value at the heart of ordinary work and at the heart of the effort to organize ordinary workers, “saying to the tailors and the dressmakers/The glory of man is on the picket line downtown” (“Words without Song”). It is work, he declares in “Te Deum of Labor,” that links “the eternities/From Jason’s ship to Lindberg’s plane.”

“When the Great Day Came,” notably, takes up somewhat the same gendered dichotomy represented in the illustrations for Markham’s “The Man with the Hoe.” It has the long-line incantatory quality of many of Giovannitti’s most successful poems. Part biblical, part Whitmanesque, it is also strikingly feminist and antiracist. It begins, in imitation of the opening of Genesis, as a creation poem, but it is actually about the creation of human culture and its ruling divisions. Deeds, he writes, were symbolically assigned a male gender, ideals a female one, and deeds, often free of redeeming values, have ruled the day ever since.

Only when these dichotomies are overturned, when “she who is twirling the spindle and swaying the loom shall go forth into the fields,” when “he who warms his hairy hands in the entrails of his foe shall croon a lullaby and rock a cradle at dusk” will we see “the Ideal triumph and the Deed become her manservant forever.” It will happen, he argues, when workers take matters into their own hands, when they answer in action the feminized call to principle. “She stands,” he concludes,

In the noonday of the world, upon the ramparts of time.
Calling, calling, calling,
Calling to the white man and the yellow man and the black man with the wild shouts of her mouth
To rise and stand up together,
To rise and stand up together against nature and destiny,
To rise and stand up together in one holy fraternity,
To rise and conquer the earth
With labor and love and mirth,
One race, one tongue, one birth,
One dream of eternity.

No one who knows Giovannitti’s history would be surprised at the focus on gender in this poem, for the Lawrence strike two decades earlier had foregrounded women’s issues and women’s labor activism. Women initiated the strike. It was the murder of a woman, Anna LoPizzo, that indirectly brought Giovannitti’s arrest. In the years since 1912–1914, his career has been largely ignored in literary criticism and his poems are mostly out of print, despite publication of his selected poems in 1962.

1930
This date is merely an estimate, for the poem at issue is an undated and untitled fragment. It is by Angelina Weld Grimké, one of a number of black women poets who were active during the celebrated Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Grimké published in Opportunity and the Crisis and in such anthologies as The New Negro and Caroling Dusk. She was especially well-known for her 1916–1920 play Rachel. Yet even during the height of the Renaissance, women like Grimké never received the level of support and publicity accorded to a few of her male contemporaries. When the Depression began, that limited support vanished entirely. Living in obscurity, Grimké for a time continued to write (but not publish) poems of extraordinary force, poems whose rhetoric and rhythms are often strikingly contemporary:

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

The poem’s studied repetitions do more than echo the blues traditions that inspired and sometimes provided models for black poets in the 1920s. For here as in the blues themselves repetition suggests a certain formal mastery of
suffering that is simultaneously personal and racial. It is suffering shaped and represented, possessed and turned into song, and thus in part triumphed over in eloquent witness.

1934

Again, the date is an approximation, but the poem, "Beaufort Tides," is a Depression-era poem by John Beecher (1904–1980), who became a poet and a rebel while working twelve-hour shifts at an open-hearth steel furnace in Birmingham, Alabama. His fellow workers were white and black, and he wrote poems about their lives and about the historical and economic determination of their suffering from the mid-1920s until the end of his life. It is first the steel-workers themselves he focuses on, both in a neutral language of flat description ("a ladle burned through/and he got a shoeful of steel") and in dialect ("Henry Matthews was a blas furnace man/He slung a sledge an he shovel san"). Then the Depression broadens his focus to all the southern poor. Finally, in poems like "Beaufort Tides," Beecher takes up the layering and mutual implication of past and present in race relations in the American South. It is as if the material ruin of the Depression becomes a figure for a violent, oppressive, and still powerfully determining history that is never far from consciousness. From the slave trade through emancipation and beyond, whites and blacks were bound together. Now neither has much ground for hope; a history that might free them of their past is almost beyond imagination:

Low tide.
The scavenging gulls
scour the reaches of mud.
No slavers ride
at anchor in the roads. Rotting hulls
are drawn up on the shore.

Full stood
the tide here
when through this colonnaded door
into the raw land passed bond and free,
the one in hope leading the other in fear,
chained each to each by destiny.

Not only tide
but time and blood
can turn, can ebb and flow.
Time ebbs, blood flows, the fear

Modern Poems We Have Wanted to Forget

shows in the master's eye while jubilee
bursts from the bondsman's throat.

Now
no shout
rings out.
Neither hopes. Both fear.
What future tide will free
these captives of their history?

It is the nation as a whole, of course, that is invoked in the poem's final lines. To read the poem now is once again, as with "Butcher McKinley," to realize how current many supposedly "topical" political poems remain. The sense of a contemporaneity layered with history is achieved partly with a deliberately mixed Anglo-Saxon vernacular and latinate diction. "Blood," "fear," "hope," and "shout" coexist and clash with "scavenging," "colonnaded," "destiny," and "jubilee." Despite the civil rights movement of the 1960s, we cannot predict what tide might remove the burden of our history.

Beecher's poem, notably, reflects not only his southern upbringing but also a general movement among white poets during the 1930s. Responding both to the inspiration provided by African-American poets in the previous decade and to the Communist Party's insistent emphasis on race and attacks on racial injustice, white poets by the end of the 1920s were beginning to write not only about black history but also about the problematic of whiteness. Some white poets even wrote poems in black dialect. Consider "A Negro Mother to Her Child," first published in the November 15, 1930, issue of the Daily Worker, later issued as a song sheet with accompanying music and reprinted as an illustrated poem on the cover of the August 1932 issue of the Rebel Poet:

Quit yo' waitin' honey bo'
'Taint no use to cry
Rubber nipple, mammy's breast
Both am gone dry.

Daddy is a Bolshevik
Locked up in de pen
Didin' rob nor didn' steal
Led de workin' men.

What's de use mah tellin' you
Silly lil' lamb
Gon’ter git it straight some day
When you is a man.

Wisht ah had a sea o’ milk
Mek you strong an’ soun’
Daddy’s waitin’ till you come
Brek dat prison down.

As in many of Sterling Brown’s poems, the author here uses dialect to embody the kind of political knowledge ordinary people can distill from their own experience. As Walter Kalaidjian points out, the poem “productively grafts the African-American folk idiom to international class revolution.” The awareness of racism and class oppression are seamlessly joined in the speaker’s voice and grounded in the difficulties of her daily life. The state has intervened in the family at the most basic level, depriving the mother of both her natural milk and the money to put milk in a bottle. Meanwhile, the family unit is shattered precisely because of its progressive politics. The institutions of the state are readily available to imprison union organizers; oppressed workers, white or black, have reason to stand together. The dialect not only makes that awareness authentic; it also gives it a wry self-awareness that turns it into a form of resistance amid hunger and deprivation. And the will to change is notably read out of family commitments; her child, she hopes, will lead the effort that frees his father from prison. But at that point the generational commitment and the image of the prison become figures for all the forms of oppression in the culture and for a revolutionary wish to see them overturned. The poem itself must thus stand in for the sea of milk that would feed all black children so they could rise up and remake the world.

“A Negro Mother to Her Child” is by V.J. Jerome, a Polish Jew who had earlier immigrated to the United States, and who became the Communist Party’s cultural commissar. Despite decades of faith in the belief that meaning inheres in texts, not in authors, we have conventionally read the meaning of poems about race off the race of their author. We have assumed, in short, that poets could write only out of their own racial identity and that poems are altogether constrained by the race of their author. In effect, our reading practices have assumed that the same words would have to have different meanings if spoken by a white or a black poet. Yet everyone to whom I give a copy of “A Negro Mother to Her Child” assumes it was written by a black woman. Since it was written by a white male, the poem’s speaking voice is actually triply transgressive—in terms of race, gender, and ethnicity. It succeeds reasonably well, I

would argue, in taking up that multiply disallowed subject position. Nor is Jerome the only writer who succeeded in doing so during the modern period.

If racism, as other scholars have demonstrated, was widespread in modern poetry, so was something else—an effort to take up and speak within or on behalf of black subjectivity. That is not to say that all poems by white and black poets, male and female, are interchangeable. Poets did most often write out of their own experience; for white poets concerned about racial issues, that was more likely to mean writing poems about publicly visible injustice than it was to mean writing poems about the ordinary lives of black people. There were, moreover, numerous pitfalls inherent in writing across racial difference, in taking up subject positions from within cultural milieus about which the poet may have had relatively little intimate knowledge. As Susan S. Gubar has demonstrated eloquently, the results are sometimes poems fractured by contradictory and often unconscious investments. Nonetheless, a much wider range of poems about race was written, published, and read than we now remember. There could hardly be a part of our modern poetic heritage that has been more costly for us to have forgotten.

1935

Lola Ridge (1873–1941), a well-known poet on the Left, agreed to reprint her poem “Stone Face,” first published in the Nation three years earlier, on a large poster (Fig. 17) to be used in organizing support for Tom Mooney’s appeal to the California State Supreme Court. The poem was later published again in Ridge’s fifth book, Dance of Fire, which was also issued in 1935, but this poster version has a special status and a distinct cultural presence that deserves to be commemorated on its own. Measuring 28 by 34 inches, the poster is clearly designed for public display at mass events. The Tom Mooney Molders’ Defense Committee of San Francisco urges its display at “Labor Day, May Day, Workit Class and Mooney parades and demonstrations, mass meetings, Union halls and Workers’ headquarters.” The poster is printed on two sides with a different photograph of Mooney and message on each. Combined with the offer to sell multiple copies in lots of ten to one thousand, the double-sided print encourages the poster’s serial display in midair or across a wall. Surviving photographs show that the poster was displayed in union offices. On the side that prints Ridge’s poem, the poster’s banner title—“LABOR MARTYR IMMORTALIZED IN POEM”—is 2¾ inches high and easily readable from across the room. The text of the poem is clear from 10 feet away. Local labor groups also used the poem for fund-raising mailings. The Chicago Federation of Labor se
LABOR MARTYR IMMORTALIZED
IN POEM

STONE FACE by LOLA RIDGE

They have carved you into a stone face, Tom Mooney,

You, there lifted high in California

Over the salt wash of the Pacific,

And your eyes... crying in many tongues,

Goading, innumerable

Eyes of the multitudes,

Holding in them all hopes, fears, persecutions...

Forever straining one way.

Even in the Sunday papers,

In your face, tight-bitten, like a pierced fist,

The eyes have a transfixed gleam

As they had glimpsed some vision and there hung

Impaled as on a bright lance.

Too much lip-foam has dripped on you, too many

And disparate signatures are scrawled under your crag face that all

Have set some finger on, to say who made you for the years

To mouth as waves mouth rock—you, a fighting grain

Cast up out of the dark Mass, terribly

The much lip-foam has dripped on you, too many

And disparate signatures are scrawled under your crag face that all

Now they—who wrote you plain, with Secco and the fisherman and elf

Wielding, on the scroll of the Republic—

Look up with a mutilated irritation at your mass face—

It set up in full sight under the long

Gaze of the multitudes, to be there:

Haggard in the sunshine, when San Quentin

Prison shall be creaved in and its steel else

Feed for the ant men... and Governor Ralph

A flock of dust among the archives.

Fig. 17. Both sides of a large poster urging Tom Mooney's release from prison. Author's collection.

A committed socialist and effective union organizer, Thomas J. Mooney (1892–1942) was arrested and charged with murder when a bomb went off and killed ten people at a parade in San Francisco in 1916. Though Mooney and several friends were some blocks away, perjured testimony placed him at the scene. Mooney was convicted and sentenced to death, but the case against him began to collapse within months. A federal commission cleared him, and the trial judge and jurors stated they had erred. Woodrow Wilson urged clemency. California's governor, James Rolph, commuted his sentence to life but refused to pardon him. This was the same governor who promised to pardon people convicted of the crime of lynching. Mooney spent twenty-three years in prison, finally being released in 1939, his health ruined. His unjust conviction and incredibly long incarceration made his one of the most notable labor cases of the century. "Stone Face" is at once part of the effort to free Mooney and an effort to instill a committed but reflective politics in its readers. Ridge castigates California's governor but also asks us to recognize that too many cultural forces have written their imperatives across Mooney's image:

They have carved you into a stone face, Tom Mooney.

You, there lifted high in California

Over the salt wash of the Pacific,

And your eyes... crying in many tongues,

Goading, innumerable

Eyes of the multitudes,

Holding in them all hopes, fears, persecutions...

Forever straining one way.

Even in the Sunday papers,

In your face, tight-bitten, like a pierced fist,

The eyes have a transfixed gleam

As they had glimpsed some vision and there hung

Impaled as on a bright lance.

Too much lip-foam has dripped on you, too many

And disparate signatures are scrawled under your crag face that all

Have set some finger on, to say who made you for the years

To mouth as waves mouth rock—you, a fighting grain

Cast up out of the dark Mass, terribly
Gestating, swarming without feature,  
And raised with torsion to identify.

Now they—who wrote you plain, with Sacco and the fish-monger and Ella  
Wiggins, on the scroll of the Republic—  
Look up with a muddled irritation at your mass face—  
It set up in full sight under the long  
Gaze of the generations, to be there,  
Haggard in the sunrise, when San Quentin  
Prison shall be caved in and its steel ribs  
Food for the ant rust . . . and Governor Rolph  
A fleck of dust among the archives.

1943
Edwin Rolfe (1909–1954), poet, journalist, and veteran of the Spanish Civil  
War, is at Camp Wolters, Texas, completing basic training in firing a 37-mm  
antitank gun. The Allied landing at Normandy is to come within a year. Most  
of his fellow recruits are younger (Rolfe is 33); more important, they lack  
Rolfe’s sense of recent history. Rolfe grew up in New York the child of Leftists,  
struggled through the Great Depression, and in 1937 went to join the Abraham  
Lincoln Battalion, which was fighting in support of the elected government  
of Spain. Spain was the first great confrontation between democracy and fascism.  
The army officers who led a revolt against the Loyalists were supported by men  
and supplies from Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy. Now, several years  
after returning home, in training to fight fascism yet again, Rolfe in his poem  "First Love" thinks of the more deeply reflective and politically informed  
commitment he shared in Spain with the men and women in the International  
Brigades.\footnote{21}

Again I am summoned to the eternal field  
green with the blood still fresh at the roots of flowers,  
green through the dust-rimmed memory of faces  
that moved among the trees there for the last time  
before the final shock, the glazed eye, the hasty mound.

But why are my thoughts in another country?  
Why do I always return to the sunken road through corroded hills,  
with the Moorish castle’s shadow casting ruins over my shoulder,  
and the black-smocked girl approaching, her hands laden with grapes?

I am eager to enter it, eager to end it.  
Perhaps this will be the last one.

And men afterward will study our arms in museums  
and nod their heads, and frown, and name the inadequate dates  
and stumble with infant tongues over the strange place-names.

But my heart is forever captive of that other war  
that taught me first the meaning of peace and of comradeship  
and always I think of my friend who amid the apparition of bombs  
saw on the lyric lake the single perfect swan.

Establishment Memory and Political Poetry

Throughout this chapter, I have deliberately selected poems with wildly varied  
publishation histories and thus somewhat different circumstances behind their  
relative erasure from our cultural memory. To forget "The Man with the Hoe"  
is, of course, to forget a poem that was once fully canonical; to devalue it is perhaps  
to devalue a whole tradition of labor poetry. If we have forgotten  
Giovanniotti’s poem it is partly because we have forgotten that the labor movement  
regularly used poetry to help define its ideals, ideals that once included a broad agenda of social reform and empowerment. The material history of "The Man with the Hoe," "St. Peter and the Scab," "Te Deum of Labor," "Stone Face,"  
and Rudolph Blum’s scrapbook help show us that literariness has been historically  
entwined with real labor struggles. Those relations are, among other things, part of the proper focus of a more comprehensive literary historiography. Yet I cannot help but think that the exclusion of labor struggles from our sense of what is properly poetic is neither accidental nor without real consequences. As we now move decisively into an era when higher education  
depends more and more heavily on exploited labor, we are often not only blind  
to the working conditions and rewards of graduate assistants, unemployed  
Ph.D.s, and part-time teachers; some tenured faculty are also outraged that their  
higher pursuits should be interrupted by unseemly complaints from below.  
"Graduate students," one English professor at Yale sarcastically remarked  
recently, "have apparently decided to call themselves workers." Contempt for  
workers might be less easily mustered if we had sustained our awareness of their place in literary history, if we remembered that literariness had served  
labor throughout our history. As it is, the discipline's repression of the memory  
of labor poetry now promotes the exploitation of untenable, underpaid,  
derunderployed, or unemployable academic workers. It was not planned that  
way, since these memories faded in the boom times of the immediate decades  
following World War II. But the repression of these cultural memories was part

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\footnote{21}
of the general encapsulation and depoliticization of the academy that took place under McCarthyism. Now one of its consequences is our inability even to recognize let alone confront the social impact of our own employment practices. The impoverished literary history we have constructed and honored is hardly the only reason for that display of ignorance and insensitivity, but it has helped make it possible. Yet as often happens, an increasingly exploitive work environment—sham apprenticeship programs for graduate students, subminimum wages for part-time faculty—has opened a moment of opportunity in which we can recognize the historical basis of our present blindness.

If we have forgotten Jerome’s poem it is partly because the Rebel Poet, where the poem was reprinted in 1932, had largely disappeared from the culture’s memory. As for the Communist Party’s Daily Worker, where it was first published, suffice it to say that virtually no literary scholar would have dreamed of looking there for a poem for more than half a century. If we have forgotten McIntyre’s poem it is partly because many of us have forgotten that there was an active socialist movement in America in the decades both before and after the turn of the century. Both that movement and the continuing labor struggles of the period produced poetry that played an important role in shaping people’s consciousness and giving them concise models of a politicized and class-conscious historical understanding. Historians of American socialism and of the American labor movement are likely to be familiar with some of this poetry, just as historians interested in America’s war in the Philippines will likely know some of the protest poetry published at the time. Among historians of literature, unfortunately, memory of these traditions is almost nonexistent. Other than Repression and Recovery, no recent histories of the poetry of the period mention Giovannitti, McIntyre, or Swift.

For literary historians the “history” of modern poetry depends on a dramatic break with the late Victorian genteel poetry of the 1880s and 1890s, poetry that continued to dominate some mass circulation magazines into the twentieth century. Except for Whitman and Crane, most literary historians now assume nothing else of interest existed until experimental modernism appeared on the scene about 1912. As it happened, many poets of the 1920s and 1930s who saw themselves as resisting the genteel tradition thought of themselves not as making a complete break with the past but rather as continuing the oppositional tradition embodied in work like that of McIntyre and Swift and IWW poets like Barnett. If they did not know McIntyre, Swift, or Barnett specifically, then they tended to know the work of other comparable poets. They might, for example, have seen some of the poems published in The International Socialist Review, from Arturo Giovannitti’s “The Walker” (September 1912) to Covington Hall’s “Us, the Hoboes” (April 1914) to Upton Sinclair’s “To Frank Tannenbaum in Prison” (June 1914) to Patrick Brennen’s “We Slaves from the Mines Down Below,” Harry Kemp’s “The Cost of War,” and Ralph Chaplin’s “The Red Feast,” all in the October 1914 issue. So modernism for some poets meant conserving and revising a continuing Left tradition of resistance to religious, patriotic, and bourgeois verse. Despite obvious stylistic differences, then, a distinct set of cultural commitments, including similar notions of the social roles that poetry can play, runs from McIntyre to Ridge to Hughes to Beecher to Rolfe and beyond. Other poets, like Eliot and Pound, thought nothing in the period worth reading. In 1946 Eliot remarked: “I cannot remember the name of a single poet of that period whose work I read.” Looking back on the decades leading up to the modernist revolution, he found that his mind was “a complete blank.” The English poets of the 1890s, he added, were “as near as we could get to any living tradition.”

Most literary historians have assumed Eliot and Pound were correct and no longer test their judgment against the poetry itself.

Though McIntyre’s and Swift’s books are now rare, they do exist in a few libraries. The average reader might find it difficult to get copies, but literary historians familiar with research methods could locate them if they chose. Lola Ridge’s books are out of print but typically available in public and university libraries. The poster version of “Stone Face,” printed in thousands of copies, is now relatively rare; literary scholars had no idea that such an object was worth preserving. “St. Peter and the Scab” and the IWW broadside poems printed here are from my personal collection and are the only surviving copies I know. The poems by Grimké and the frequently anonymous poems by Chinese immigrants are another matter. Grimké’s poem survived as a handwritten manuscript in her papers at Howard University, but it remained unpublished in its entirety until 1989. The Angel Island poems by Chinese immigrants were forgotten when the barracks were closed in 1940. Many were painted over and are now lost. But some were first written in brush stroke and then carved into the wooden pillars and walls. They were rediscovered by a park ranger in 1970, who noticed Chinese characters inscribed on the walls of the decaying building (it was scheduled for demolition) and notified an Asian scholar, who arranged to have all the texts photographed. The poems were then translated into English and collected in Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910–1940 (1980). All the surviving poems, however, are by men, since the building that housed women detainees burned down in 1940. That Grimké’s manuscripts were saved, despite the fact that almost no one was interested in her for the last twenty-five years of her life, that a park ranger took an interest in the Angel Island poems just before they would
have been destroyed, are obviously instances of historical accident rather than evidence of the dominant culture’s interest in preserving minority poetry.

What would it have taken, how different would our culture have to have been, for us to be assured that texts like these would survive? We would certainly had to have been far more deeply invested in understanding and preserving the culture of oppressed minorities and of antiestablishment subcultures. But it is partly the culture’s indifference and hostility that brought these poems to be written in the first place. So resistance to racism and social injustice brought the poems into existence, while racism and class bias or political antagonism themselves in turn assured that the poems would remain marginal and have little chance to be remembered. How many comparable poems have been altogether lost we will never know. Of course the English profession might have defined itself in opposition to the dominant culture and consequently regarded preserving literature by women and minorities and working-class people as a central part of its mission, but clearly it did not.

The issues become still more complex when we add the poems by Beecher and Rolfe. For most of his life John Beecher published poems only in little magazines and in small press publications. In the 1950s he and his wife printed some of his work themselves, often with her elegant, dramatic woodcuts as illustrations (Fig. 18). But his reputation grew nonetheless, enough so that his Collected Poems was issued in New York and London by a major publisher, Macmillan, in 1974. Quite widely reviewed, it was reprinted the following year, all this without any effort on Macmillan’s part to publicize the book. Except for people with a specific interest in poetry on the Left, Beecher’s name remains unknown to most scholars of modern poetry. Yet specialists in modern poetry have had more than enough opportunity to encounter his work. Rolfe’s case is rather different. His first book, published in 1936 by Dynamo, a small but somewhat famous Left publisher, received a number of notices, including one in the New York Times Book Review, which was published along with his photograph. But when he put together a book of poems focused on the Spanish Civil War in the late 1940s he could find no publisher willing to take on what was by then, in the opening years of the postwar inquisition, a heretical topic. The poem “First Love (Remembering Spain)” was published, oddly enough, in Yank: The Army Weekly in 1945, where Rolfe titled it as he did in an effort to increase the chance that Yank’s readers might recognize the historical references. Rolfe’s First Love and Other Poems, for which “First Love” became the title poem, was privately published in 1951. The Larry Edmunds Book Shop in Los Angeles allowed Rolfe to use its name on the title page; he made financial arrangements with a printer and sold the book himself. Until his Collected Poems was published in 1993, his work was known largely to two groups only: those interested in the Spanish Civil War and those interested in the political poetry of the Great Depression. To the general run of English professors his name meant nothing. Beecher’s poetry has had some recent visibility; Rolfe’s has now effectively reentered the discourse of modern poetry scholars. His Collected Poems received a full-page review in the New York Review of Books; several scholars, among them Edward Brunner, Walter Kalaidjian, and Michael Thurston, have written essays
on his work, and his poems are reappearing in anthologies. Like McIntyre, Swift, Giovannitti, and Ridge, both Rolfe and Beecher, however, write from unpopular political perspectives and take up topics that part of the English profession still considers "unpoetic." That was enough to sweep them up and cover them over in the same tide of conformist values dominating the English profession's understanding of its cultural mission for decades.

So we have energetic poems about working-class life and about international politics that are part of a long but marginalized movement for social justice, anonymous poems carved into a barracks wall by members of a repressed minority, a haunting unpublished fragment by a black woman who was essentially ignored once the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance was past, a powerful reflection on the palimpsestic layering of racial trauma that has shaped American history for three hundred years, a poem in black dialect written by a Communist Party official, a scrapbook of poetic values assembled by a labor organizer, a poem urging attendance at a labor rally, and a rather beautiful meditation on the great international cause of the late 1930s—the defense of the Spanish Republic. Poems published in limited editions; poems issued on ephemeral posters, cards, or broadsides; poems collected in a personal scrapbook; poems published by a major publisher; poems that remained unpublished for five decades. Poems whose publication or nonpublication history is partly a function of the vicissitudes of the individual lives of their authors. But poems, all of them, that were eventually obliterated within a dominant social history that values some kinds of people and some kinds of writing and not others. It is important, I believe, to acknowledge both the specific histories of these texts and the larger cultural forces that helped determine whether they would be remembered and valued. We need both small- and large-scale narratives to account for their disappearance from our memory.

One of the primary tasks of recovery is thus to construct the individual stories of careers, communities, disputes, and movements that have long been either ignored or forgotten. If there is no possibility of constructing a single overarching narrative about modern poetry that is fair or representative, let alone comprehensive, if there is no one story about modern poetry to relate, there are thus nonetheless a multitude of rich but partial stories to tell. Several scholars have begun doing the research necessary to tell those stories. In the process, entire literary subcultures with distinctive uses for poetry have come to occupy space in our cultural memory that has not existed in many cases since the participants themselves were alive.

At the opening of the modern period Lee Furey and Mark Van Wienen have begun to recover the story of the centrality of poetry and song to the history of America's most radical union, the Industrial Workers of the World. Furey has also given us our first detailed account of Arturo Giovannitti's poetry, while Van Wienen has recovered the rich community of women poets writing against World War I. At the end of the modern period Susan Swikid and Violet Kazue de Cristofofaro have told the story of the Japanese-American poetry written in our unconstitutional internment camps during World War II.

Here and there in our culture, to be sure, there is recognition and honor granted to some of these writers and traditions, though not necessarily any intricate literary analysis. Labor historians are certainly aware of Giovannitti and the IWW, though they are more likely to think of labor poetry as local color than as culturally or politically central. On the other hand, if one looks at most comprehensive accounts of modern poetry, none of these bodies of work makes an appearance. The major surveys of modern poetry—even as ambitious a study as David Perkins's two volume history—pass over all or most of these traditions seamlessly. Their absence leaves the dominant story undisturbed. Yet when we read accounts like those of Furey, Harrington, Van Wienen, and Swikid, entire rich cultural moments open up within the familiar history to unsettle it and saturate it with narrative depth and alternative meaning it had no trace of beforehand. It is as if an existing time line is suddenly permeated with new names, events, and connotations, enough so that our faith in the possibility of anyone ever producing a comprehensive account is appropriately shattered.

The standard tale told by literature professors is that all poems have an equal chance in the contest to be remembered and valued by subsequent generations. Some poems, so the argument goes—especially those that lack formal coherence and whose language lacks sufficient figurative interest—are inevitably judged inferior and forgotten. Other poems—especially those "topical" poems devoted to public issues of transitory interest—inevitably pass out of our memory in favor of texts with more obvious long-term relevance. In other words the profession claims it makes judgments based on aesthetic value and cultural staying power. These few texts, only some of them quoted here in their entirety and one of those a fragment, offer, surprisingly enough, a sufficient basis on which to begin testing those claims. Have our purportedly aesthetic standard been disinterested, or have they inevitably been entangled with political and social beliefs? Is cultural staying power built into the poems themselves or is it the product of ongoing struggle and negotiation?

"St. Peter and the Scab" and the poems by McIntyre and Swift, polemical and satiric, are part of a large class of poems that fall outside the wide range of lyrical styles preferred by academics who do close analysis of poetry. Yet they are not nonfigurative—Swift's poem indeed takes up many of the metaphors th
were prevalent during public debate over the Philippines; rather, their metaphors are not part of a distinctive language that seems to belong only to the poet. The metaphors are drawn from public life and the poems turn their intelligence and wit back on public life; the metaphors are returned to the public arena in what is, the poet perhaps hopes, a damaged, more self-conscious, and less usable form. That is particularly important in the case of Swift’s poem, since racism permeated not only the arguments in favor of the war in the Philippines but also the arguments of some who objected to our involvement. Markham’s poem is perhaps a borderline case; for many academics, its figurative character will seem too bound up in a polemical cause. The figurative quality of Ridge’s poem is presumably undermined by its topicality, though some of the issues she addresses—including the way individuals are taken up in public life and the injustices perpetrated by courts and politicians—are hardly limited to one era. Her sense of the way publicity pervasively shapes and transforms a person’s image is clearly more dramatically true now than it was seventy years ago; nor is it clear why Mooney’s story is not itself worth remembering. The two poems by Chinese immigrants use metaphors marked by cultural specificity and historical positioning, rather than by distinctive subjectivity. They speak potentially for all those who passed through Angel Island. But, once again, even in these deliberately literal translations, they are not nonmetaphoric. Indeed, some of their interest grows out of the way their figurative displacement mirrors the physical, cultural, and political displacement of their authors—from mainland China to San Francisco Bay. Interestingly, they are not simply poems of victimization. Though the Chinese dragons are out of water, they are dragons still; it is white Americans who are the ants. As much as anything else the poems testify to a sustaining belief in a cultural power that retains its force however much it is historically compromised and constrained. The poems, too, are dragons out of water, taken out of their natural environment, but they are also tigers that are only temporarily caged. The fragment by Grimké uncannily mixes conversational with hortatory rhetorics in such a way as to make its isolation powerfully representative; it too employs language of considerable potential interest. Her repetitions, for example, are at once colloquial and incantatory. As a result they lend a certain sacramental power to everyday life. And finally, what should to any reader schooled in modern poetry be the obvious metaphoric inventiveness of the poems by Beecher and Rolfe; these poems have the kind of complex and multiple figurative readability often prized by academics. While their social commitments are strong, their language is far from simple. In short, the claim that “political” poetry—and all these poems are political in different ways—has little figurative interest is a false and dishonorable one.

Yet taste is a powerful deceiver. Its transitory effects seem always to evoke eternal verities. That may partly explain the following passage in Mark Scroggins’s fine 1998 book on Louis Zukofsky:

my impression is that many readers, and readers quite in sympathy with Nelson’s project as a whole, continue to find the majority of that poetry lacking: whatever the human value of the social and political interventions represented by the work of such poets as H. H. Lewis and Edwin Rolfe, their poetry lacks the aesthetic depth and complexity of some of their less committed contemporaries. That is, despite whatever successes it might have had in conveying the truth of the political realm . . . it has failed to measure up in the realm in which we have been accustomed to judge poetry, the aesthetic realm where beauty remains at least as important as truth.

Can it really be that Scroggins can find no difference worth remarking between H. H. Lewis, perhaps the most baldly and sardonically polemical poet of the 1930s, and Edwin Rolfe, who never wrote a political poem quite like Lewis’s “Thinking of Russia”:

I’m always thinking of Russia,
I can’t get her out of my head,
I don’t give a damn for Uncle Sham,
I’m a left-wing radical Red.

Is Scroggins really unable to differentiate between Lewis’s “Thinking of Russia” and Rolfe’s “First Love”? Lewis was obviously enjoying himself when he wrote “Thinking of Russia.” It is designed to violate good taste; that is one of its pleasures, at least for those readers who can find space in their lives for different sorts of poetry. If Lewis was the limit case of political poetry in my Repression and Recovery, “St. Peter and the Scab” occupies that place here. But part of my aim was to help readers recognize the difference between Lewis’s rowdy doggerel and Rolfe’s anguished lyricism. Neither poem, however, operates outside the realm of the aesthetic. Lewis’s rhythms, rhymes, and diction burlesque certain standards of beauty and thereby incorporate a response to those standards within his poem. “Thinking of Russia” is articulated to the very values it rejects. Rolfe’s “First Love,” conversely, is written within a belief in lyrical beauty, but by a poet who believes the gift and loss of political faith is an appropriate aesthetic concern.

Among the myths that sustain the English profession’s sense of its own reasonableness is the notion that it is possible to place a poem like one of those above on a set of scales alongside, say, Eliot’s The Waste Land, and adjudicate their
relative merits. But of course The Waste Land is now deposited on those scales along with a host of accumulated readings and value judgments that richly explain and valorize every line in the text. Whereas the poems by McIntyre, Swift, the Chinese immigrants, Grimké, Ridge, Beecher, and, until very recently, Rolfe arrive unheralded and unread. If there is anything distinctive about their aesthetics and potential social function it will, unlike the aesthetics of The Waste Land, most likely be something we are unlikely to be prepared to recognize let alone value. The Waste Land arrives, moreover, infused with a powerful semiotic of social and professional utility; we read The Waste Land not only as a confirmation of what modern poetry was at its core but also as a confirmation of who we are as social agents with the important role of preserving and interpreting modern poetry. The only status the poems by McIntyre et al. have in that scenario is the status of poems that need not have been remembered. One conclusion to be drawn from these arguments is that we cannot read noncanonical modern poetry fairly unless we are willing not only to refrain from reading modern poetry but also to rethink the social meaning of a commitment to studying and disseminating literature.

It was not always that way. Throughout the 1930s an ongoing struggle over the nature of modernism and the nature of literature’s social mission took place in newspapers and journals and in public debate. In 1938 Random House brought out Selden Rodman’s A New Anthology of Modern Poetry with socially conscious poems by Sarah Teasdale, Robert Frost, Edwin Rolfe, Sol Funaroff, Muriel Rukeyser, and others. It is a collection for the general reader, not a comprehensive anthology. Still, though there is a section of ten “neurotic songs,” the absence of poets like Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen and Angelina Weld Grimké is notable. It is thus not an ideal collection. But the inclusion of items like Bartolomeo Vanzetti’s “Last Speech to the Court” tells us something important about what counted as poetry, what counted as its history, and what seemed marketable to the general public during that decade. Rodman, however, also makes some remarks about the work of two of his rival anthologists, Louis Untermeyer and Conrad Aiken: “Neither of these anthologists has shown much favor to the significant new poetry of the general public. Neither has included any folk-verse. Both have favored the lyric almost to the exclusion of the characteristic narrative and epic poetry of our time.”

There was therefore not unanimity about the poems that mattered during the 1930s, but the subject was still open for debate. Nor was there any doubt that poetry had become pervasively and overtly politicized. One could object to these developments, but they could not be ignored. Some sense of the strain involved in trying to separate poetry and politics can be heard in the rhetoric of Allen Tate’s preface to his 1936 Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas. “A political poetry,” Tate wrote, “or a poetical politics, of whatever denomination is a society of two members living on each other’s washing. They devour each other in the end. It is the heresy of a spiritual cannibalism.” Tate’s rage, of course, is reactive; he is arguing against a widespread politicizing of poetry that he finds dangerous or worse. He is not, in other words, arguing against an impossible relation but against a relation he considers real but pernicious.

That much is true as well of Cleanth Brooks’s 1939 Modern Poetry and the Tradition, which casts proletarian or political poetry out of modernism and out of the true tradition of English and American poetry. In his chapter “Metaphysical Poetry and Propaganda Art” he finds political poetry “incapable of enduring an ironical contemplation” because it is devoted to single unqualified beliefs. I find it hard to square such claims with the poems I have just quoted, but you may judge for yourself. Brooks takes as his representative case the famous 1935 collection Proletarian Literature in the United States, which included work by twenty-nine poets along with sections on fiction, drama, reporting and literary criticism. Among the poets are Rolfe, Fearing, Rukeyser, Stanley Burnshaw, Richard Wright, and David Wolff (Ben Maddow). Brooks singles out only two, however, for a casual dismissal: Genevieve Taggard and Langston Hughes. Neither is any good; neither is really within poetry’s true tradition. Brooks’s argument gained some additional credibility because so many people were alienated by the 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact; that also helped Philip Rahv’s typically intemperate 1939 Southern Review essay “Proletarian Literature: A Political Autopsy.” In any case, by the end of the decade a number of the people associated with New Criticism and with the winnowing and consolidation of the modernist canon had weighed in on the side of the eternal verity of purportedly apolitical art. Brooks’s immensely influential text Understanding Poetry (1938) helped codify these values for a generation.

Comments like Brooks’s or Tate’s are so commonplace an element of the New Critical tradition that came to dominate American literary studies after the Second World War that we forget they were first uttered at a moment when their wide acceptance seemed rather unlikely. Tate was fighting a rear guard action against cultural changes that seemed unstoppable. In time Tate’s sense of violated honor would be replaced by a bemused disgust at the unholy mixing of poetry and politics. Eventually, Tate’s position ceased to be one that had to be argued; it became an article of faith. No longer would Tate’s anguish, Rahv’s malice, or, for that matter, Brooks’s elaborate argument, be needed. The obvious inferiority of political poetry could be stated briefly on the assumption other academic readers would agree. As the American academy passed from the late 1940s into the early 1950s—the period when the academic canon of modernism was consolidated—Tate’s warnings would be supplanted by calm evocations of canonical
truths. They became received truth for the poetry establishment. When Babette Deutsch wrote an unsympathetic review of Hughes’s Montage of a Dream Deferred for the New York Times Book Review in 1951 she could imply, with self-satisfied confidence, that Eliot had shown us earlier the proper way to write about the modern city. But behind that calm, that covered over McIntyre and dozens of other political poets, was considerable anxiety. For by then the suppression of leftist political poetry had become part of the Cold War.

I would like to suggest, therefore, that we can think of late 1940s and early 1950s reincarnations of Brooks’s and Tate’s views rather differently. Consider such denials of meaningful relations between poetry and politics, if you will, not as the unimpeachable consensus of the academy but rather as desperate denials of a long tradition whose recent flowering presented a considerable threat to the livelihoods of literature professors. I am suggesting that we take the commonplace 1950s versions of Tate’s views as indirect testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee or the Senate Permanent Sub-Committee on Investigations. The effort to separate poetry and politics was not simply part of a discourse internal to academic literary studies but rather a part of the public positioning and defense of literariness. Part of what is remarkable about this consensus is how long it lasted. Many of us taught Vietnam war poetry in the 1960s and 1970s in relative ignorance of its predecessors.

The Assault on Langston Hughes

With screenwriters among HUAC’s first targets in 1947 and other authors called to testify as well, there was little reason to doubt the price to be paid for a commitment to progressive writing. Having been cast out by the academic community and with more than a decade of public Left activism to his credit, Langston Hughes, for example, was conveniently available as a target. Only a year after Brooks voiced his contempt for his poetry, Hughes began to undergo what would end up being a decade of attacks from the Right. In 1940 religious groups organized by the evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson blocked a speech Hughes was to give in California. As with other people on the Left, Hughes received a partial reprieve when the Soviet Union became our ally and we entered World War II. But seven years later, in 1947, J. Edgar Hoover attacked Hughes in a speech read by a subordinate. The following year the far Right figure Gerald L. K. Smith organized a more aggressive hate campaign. An 8½-by-11-inch flier featuring Hughes’s 1932 poem “Goodbye Christ” was mass distributed (Fig 19). It described Hughes as “one of the most notorious propagandists for the lovers of Stalin” and one who “moves in the circles of mongrel-